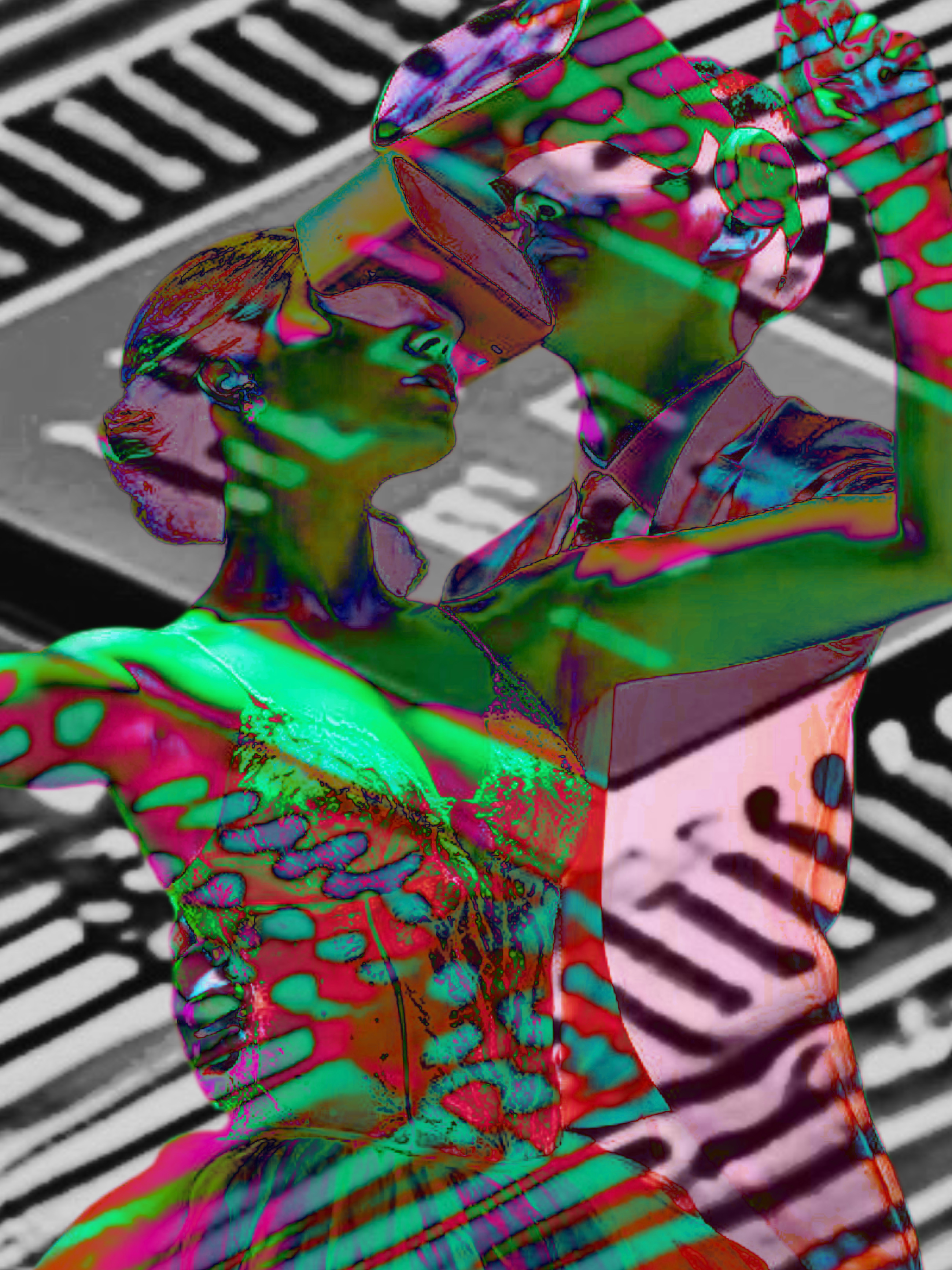
Eleven Eleven

*I* *dedicate this story to Raymond Myers, who continually helped me realize my dreams. I hold the deepest affection in my heart for the man who always believed in me.*

**Part One: High and Low Pointes**

My toes hurt constantly, but being a ballerina has always been more than a dream to me; dreams are additive to your life, so if they don’t come true, it’s hard, but it is not everything; there is no separation between ballet and me. It's likely because my obsession began when I was young as a form of escape. I grew up in an explosive household where my father regularly abused my mother physically and emotionally. So, my grandmother, Carolyn, a bohemian artist, showed me the gift of escaping through creativity. My grandmother had me involved in many activities until I settled on ballet.

Then, I hardly had to be home, but I could escape into that world when I was. I would hear my father smashing things and calling my mother vile names, and put on my pointe shoes and be transported somewhere better. And when you invest like that, you have to make it; it’s do or die. I never gave myself any option but to manifest this. I had my sights set on New York and getting away from Delaware; I figured my fear would mostly stay behind if I crossed state lines, and I had no reason to stay.

My hard work was rewarded during my senior year when I discovered that my audition tape had secured me an all-expenses-paid audition in New York. I was thrilled. However, I was about to discover that dreaming can be a dangerous thing.

I was sitting in math class and noticed that the day was 11/11, which was fitting because those are the wishing numbers, and my greatest wish was about to come true, as my trip to New York was only a few months away. I was daydreaming about my new life when we all heard loud, popping noises, as if someone was setting off fireworks indoors, but then the popping was followed by screams. My teacher, looking irritated, went to see what was going on; he came back with a look of terror and promptly told us to break the windows and get out because there was an active shooter.

Seconds later, the teacher shut the door and sat behind it to hold it shut. After this, Daniel, a very tall and kind boy, broke the window with a chair and guided the other students out while the teacher screamed, “Daniel, go quicker! They are pushing on the door!”

Daniel was going as quickly as he could, and only six of us out of the original twenty-four were in that room when the door was forced open. My teacher tried to fight them and screamed, “No! No! No! These are just kids. We can work this out. Just shoot me and leave them.”

It was impossible to see the faces of the two men because they had masks covering everything but their eyes, making them look like ghouls. The gunman to the right smiled at my teacher’s pleading and told the other gunman, “You heard the man shoot him,” and then, my teacher was pierced by an automatic weapon many times in his chest.

I hid under my teacher’s desk and looked at my teacher’s dead body; blood was pouring from him, and his eyes were wide open. Then I watched as the remaining students were shot dead, and then everything went black.

When I opened my eyes, I heard people screaming everywhere. Seeing my eyes open, a boy named Kalvis came to my side and said, “Help is on the way.” Then he held my hand and prayed. I hardly knew Kalvis, except that he was very Christian and was a shining example of that in all the interactions I saw.

Since regaining consciousness, my mind didn’t fully remember what had happened, but as I looked around and saw the carnage, it all returned to me, and then I screamed, “Oh my God. Oh my God.”

Kalvis cradled my head, directed my eyes to his own, and said, “Don’t look at that. Look at me.”

He had a baby face that gradually developed into that of a handsome man, and his family owned a farm, so he had the sculpted body of a farmer. And he was as stoic and reassuring, which calmed me for a moment until I saw the blood dripping from my body, and then I freaked out and said, “We’ve got to go. What if they come back?”

Kalvis put his face beside my ear and said, “Don’t worry, I will protect you, but they are gone, I promise.”

As he said this, I could feel his tears running from his eyes to my cheeks. Then he said, “You have to stay still; you’re hurt, but you’re going to be ok.” Kalvis held me and didn’t leave my side.

Later, SWAT and police came through, and they yelled for everyone to lie face down on the ground with our hands interlaced behind our heads; they didn’t know if the shooters were among us and were not taking any chances as they started to clear the school.

All the while, Kalvis lay face down and right beside me. Still, with his hands not cupping my face any longer, my eyes wandered to Daniel, whose body lay in an extremely disturbing way, and then to the teacher, who died protecting his students, and then to all of the other dead students. Seeing this, I became very distressed and started to panic, so Kalvis whispered to me, saying that he had seen me in “The Nutcracker” when his sister was still doing ballet, and he always thought I moved spectacularly. I seemed to blush at this admission, and then he asked me more about ballet.

However, it did not take long before Kalvis got impatient and worried, so he was fearless and grabbed a passing SWAT officer. The officer was not pleased at this and told Kalvis he needed to get down or get shot; the law enforcement officers were scared, too. Kalvis’s response was, “I’m not fucking moving. She’s dying, man. She needs help. Fucking, please help.”

There was no immediate response, but Kalvis continued to shake, tears running down his cheeks. “Please, man.”

Something about this touched the officer, who radioed, “Officer Hardy in, you can let a responder in room 102; it’s clear. There’s someone alive but in bad shape.”

A woman’s voice replied, “Officer Hardy, this is Hurdle; that’s a no-go; the building hasn’t been completely cordoned off and cleared.”

In a firm voice, Officer Hardy responded, “That wasn’t a request… Hardy, out.”

I wondered what had made him break protocol; perhaps he had a daughter or a lover he would cry and beg to save. Whatever it was, it was enough. The officer then told Kalvis to return to the ground, and Kalvis complied.

Shortly after, I was lifted onto a stretcher, and they removed the sweatshirt Kalvis had pressed on my chest to try to stop the bleeding; it was soaked, and my hair was red from the blood. It was then that I noticed how badly I was hurt.

Then, I was rolled quickly out into the hallway, which showed the evidence of the mass shooting that took place: so much blood, students crying, and many pale bodies who would never leave this school alive again. The EMTs who were carrying my stretcher all had tears running down their cheeks, and by the time we were outside, their breathing was labored, and they were exhausted. As I was lifted into an ambulance, the man with the last name King on his nameplate asked me my name, and I said, “My name is Mary,” and then I lost consciousness again.

They ended up putting me into a medical coma, and I woke up days later. My mother was seated on my bed and said, “Oh my God! Nurse, she is awake.”

The nurse came quickly, was very glad to see me awake, and then called for the doctor, who looked exhausted; the number of victims was significant even with utilizing a few hospitals, some transports, and airlifts; forty deaths and forty-five more were injured. Given the numbers of the wounded or dead, it was hard for many people to understand how assault weapons are something you could just own.

As the doctor entered, I started to sit up, to which he said, “Don’t.”

It was then that I could feel the intense pain below my left breast and looked down to see gauze and padding. The doctor said, “You are lucky to be alive; the bullet missed your heart by centimeters.”

Then, the memories became powerful, and I started crying. I didn’t want to see anyone, and I didn’t want to talk about anything. I didn’t feel like part of this world anymore; I was out of reach before, but now, I am unreachable.

After a week of being confined to that hospital bed, I was eager to get out; my audition was approaching, and I needed to practice. When I expressed this, they told me that wouldn’t happen; I had limitations now. The doctor said, “Those dreams will have to die, but others can live on.”

I told them I wasn’t giving it up. My rage and depression were palpable; they were understanding but then became exasperated. I didn’t care, so I announced I was leaving after some time. My mother all but wrestled me into staying, but I told her I was going because my dream was all I had, and I refused to lose everything.

I left the hospital and didn’t go back to school, so my small world became smaller as I secluded myself further.

When the time came, I packed up with no intention of returning. I decided to stay in New York if I wasn’t accepted, as I didn’t care to be anywhere near this place.

On the plane, I saw the world from a different and higher perspective. A woman sat beside me, talking about her Hindu religion with all the vigor I had for ballet. I couldn’t pay attention to any of it as I was consumed with anxiety.

When the plane landed, I boarded a small chartered bus to the hotel where all the hopefuls would be staying. I stayed to myself with my headphones in, listening to the audition playlist and running my routine in my head. I watched without audio as the other ballerina hopefuls chatted excitedly, and I wished I could trade places with them and feel like I belonged. I didn’t trust anyone and felt so much hate in my heart that I often wondered if fulfilling my lifelong dream would be enough to expel it. I felt like I was frozen while everyone moved around me. Violence affects you deeply long after it is over.

After we arrived at the hotel, I couldn't believe how grand it was, especially considering its location in such a popular area. While waiting in the lobby, they handed us our itinerary, which included planned dinners and activities, as well as some free time between them, during which we could explore the city. After receiving the itinerary, a very tall gentleman gave a welcome speech, stating that we would each have a roommate, and then handed out the assigned room key cards. My room number was 970. I was shocked by a booking mistake that resulted in my being assigned the presidential suite, complete with its own floor.

When I arrived at the room, I was taken aback by the odd choice of pairing me with a male roommate; he introduced himself as Josh but said that everyone called him “Peter Pan” or “Pan,” which I immediately declined to do. I asked him if he got the nickname because he refused to grow up, and he said, “Oh, no! I’m from Louisiana, and I was skinny dipping in my boyfriend's pool when a huge gator decided to join me. Trying to get out quickly, my belongings on the pool’s edge fell in, including my clothes and a fake Rolex; it was a good fake, as you could barely tell it actually said ‘Ralex’; the gator immediately ate the watch.

“The worst part was my boyfriend’s parents came home early to find me naked, watching the gator. Keenan’s parents didn’t seem thrilled at first, but the playful gator, now wearing my New York baseball hat, disarmed them; it was the cutest thing we had ever seen. From then on, they called me Peter Pan, and it stuck. I even got a costume for some kinky role play, and Keenan made a damn fine Tinker Bell.”

I didn’t know what to say; I could not believe this was a true story. Still, his bubbly, effervescent personality made me think that this was precisely the type of person this zany shit happens to, and he moved on without indicating it was a joke. So I held out my hand and introduced myself, “Well then… I’m Mary.”

He smiled and hugged me, even though a hand in front of you was supposed to be the international sign for a handshake; then he said, “It’s a pleasure to make your acquaintance, my lady.”

In turn, I said, “Do you think it’s weird that they put opposite sexes together in a room?”

He laughed and said, “They didn’t! They put you in this room alone because you wrote two compelling pages about why you want to have your own space.”

I could have never anticipated this answer; I thought, “So, to my request to be alone, you requested to be with me? Are you a sociopath?” Seeing that I wasn’t following his thinking, he added, “Well… I heard they made a mistake, and you were getting this $10,000-a-night room…”

My mouth dropped in disbelief; this place was over-the-top nice, but I couldn’t make it past Peter Pan to see much of it. I asked, “What?”

He replied, “It’s true! So, I wondered what this room would be like and decided to change the paperwork when I stopped by earlier in the week, since I live in New York. I made my name less legible to resemble Jayce, put it on the roster next to yours, and figured that they might forget; luckily, they did! Also, the best people are weirdo recluses and worth knowing; no offense.”

I don’t know how a well-adjusted, social person would have reacted, but have you ever seen a cat get scared by something and fly into the air as if it were bounced on an invisible trampoline? That can best describe the feeling I had. But I’m not a confrontational person, so I wasn’t going to say anything, and I think even if I did, his Peter Pan logic would win, and I would be apologizing to him.

Breaking up the pause of silence, he asked, “Do you want to put on some makeup and go clubbing? This is my mother fucking town! I will show you the real stuff, not the touristy things these others will do.”

I set my bag down, carefully unpacked, and answered, “I can’t; I have to study.”

His eyes got wide, and he said, “Shit, is there a test on famous ballets and stuff? I don’t know any of that.”

I said, “There’s no test I am aware of.”

This time, he was silent and said, “ I’m confused; you are worried about a stupid high school test?”

I said, “No. I run my number in my head several times and practice what I can. I also memorize the entire organization’s members’ bio, experiences, and other pertinent information.”

He laughed and said, “You’re a goddamn psychopath. But you’re my little psychopath. We’re going out!”

I could not believe that the man who sometimes fucked Tinker Bell and broke into an office to change a roster was calling me the psychopath. So, I said, “I should say the same for you.”

He laughed and said, “That’s the spirit!”

I was trying to understand this when he grabbed my hand and put it in his hand, so we held hands; the cat inside me jumped again and ended up in outer space. I’m not a touchy-feely person, and I don’t just touch people; I enjoy my space, both emotionally and physically. Unfortunately, more than that, I am not confrontational, which won the war.

So, he led me to the extravagant bathroom, sat me down, and said, “I heard Rihanna conceived her first child bent over this vanity.”

Incredulous, I said, “Really?”

He smiled and said, “I’m not sure, but wouldn’t that be cool? The doorman told me that she stays in this room from time to time.”

As he did my hair and makeup, he rambled about his life. He said he followed his on-and-off boyfriend, a web designer, to New York. Josh said he hated the cold but loved everything else, so even though their relationship was off, he stayed. As he spoke, I noticed that Josh was very handsome; he was tall, had a ballet dancer’s body tone, a sculpted face structure, and medium-length brown hair; he also had fantastic posture and moved with great grace.

After speaking manically for some time, he asked me about myself, but after hearing all his strange tales, I felt ashamed at how exceptionally small my life was. So, I didn’t say much except for my experience and accomplishments in ballet.

He didn’t know what to make of it, but surprisingly, he didn’t pry; instead, he pulled out a mixed drink of peach schnapps and a black licorice liquor he had created himself. He said, “I call this a hairy asshole. Drink this!”

I never had drunk alcohol or planned to, but I thought when I did, it would be something fancy like a martini after I turned 21, so I said, “No, thank you, but you enjoy your ‘Hairy Asshole.’”

He smiled and said, “I always do! But drink this. If you want to be a better dancer, you must drink.”

I kept saying “no,” but then my fear of confrontation and weak resolve were overpowered, and I drank the “hairy asshole.” It was one of the few things that tasted exactly like its namesake must. I wanted to throw up right there. I said, “Josh… This is fucking gross!”

He drank more and handed me back the bottle, saying, “Actually, there is this phenomenon where you hate something, but it grows on you, and you love it. I have found that to be true here.”

I said, “Josh, that is probably because you're so drunk after a few swigs that anything tastes okay.”

He grinned and said, “We will see… Drink up, crazy lady.”

We finished the bottle, and by the time he was done with my hair and makeup, we were both drunk. I looked like I had never done before when he did his big reveal; I have decent bone structure, but I have always been plain and forgettable, yet he made me look like a high-fashion model. He saw my pleased expression, got an ego boost, and said, “I watch a lot of YouTube on the subway; I can teach you if you want.”

I didn’t know there was a reason for this in my rigid and lonely life, but I said, “That would be nice, Pied Piper.”

He smiled and said, “Well… missy, what will you wear?”

I told him that I had nothing but casual clothes and my ballet gear. He said, “That’s okay. There’s a lost and found. I bet that cute concierge will hook us up.”

I fully expected him to call on the hotel phone, but then he grabbed his personal phone and flirtatiously spoke with the man on the line. I said, “I didn’t know you had stayed here prior.”

He hadn’t; he was just really good at getting what he wanted; my black tongue and horrible breath should’ve been my first clue.

Minutes later, that man was in our room and was definitely interested in Josh; you could tell he was trying to impress. The dress he had in tow was a very sexy one; it was a sleeveless lace top that showed just a little of my belly, and the skirt that accompanied it was like nothing that I had ever seen before; there was a base skirt with all of these different layers of lace in silver, grey, and black woven; it gave the appearance that the skirt was floating. As I twirled, the man said, “You look lovely. This is a designer piece. A drunk socialite puked on it, so we got it dry-cleaned. She won’t be looking for it because she probably forgot she has it, but just in case, be careful.”

I agreed and felt like Cinderella.

Josh walked the man out and kissed him passionately; when he returned, I remarked, “Wow… You move fast.”

He replied, “Damn, you move slowly.” It was apparent that many things in life are subjective.

I then asked him a question that I would never have asked sober, “But what about your boyfriend? Don’t you think you guys can patch things up?”

Then, the ordinarily cheery Josh became sullen and said, “Keenan isn’t really in my life that much anymore. It's sad because, while it was always a challenging relationship, it was also one of a kind, as we fit into each other in a way that no other person could; it’s hard to quit something like that. Our love was a very addictive drug and just as destructive. He went through a dark time because of the bullying and hurt surrounding his sexuality, yet I always hoped for him to see the light again and return to how he was. I even held a spotlight as my arms went numb from the weight. But then, in addition to the moodiness, he was absent; I was always there, but whenever I asked for him to be there, he couldn’t be bothered, and then he would gaslight me into believing I was the selfish one. When I realized the change was permanent, I left him. It hasn’t been easy; I miss so much about him.”

Watching the sparkly Josh become deflated was shocking, but he only stayed in that state for a moment before taking a swig out of a different flask, and he asked me, “Have you ever been in love?”

I responded quickly, “I have never dated anyone. So, no.” He nearly spit the liquor out as he said, “Really? That’s ridiculous! Well… have you ever had a crush?”

I said, “Um…No.”

He saw my hesitation and said, “Don’t lie! You must have had at least one.”

I didn’t want to talk about it, but I didn’t want him to keep asking, so I said, “There was this boy named Kalvis, and we went through something terrible together. He tried to reach out after that, but I refused because I didn’t want to be reminded of it.”

It surprised me that I was putting into words my very complicated feelings, which I had been unable to do prior, but I figured that it was the alcohol. I then had my own dark moment and realized how hard it is to return from it.

Josh, seeing the tears well in my eyes, hugged me and then pushed the alcohol to my lips, put on some music, and we danced for a while.

Afterward, he called a number and told me we needed to go downstairs because our ride would be there soon.

As we rode in the elevator, he said, “We’re going to be picked up by a man we call Dr. Big; he has a fancy town car. He’s a cardiologist and general surgeon based in Manhattan, and one of the best in the business. Also, he is very wealthy and generous. I always enjoy my time with him.”

The town car was there waiting for us, and we got in. Dr. Big was attractive, dressed in a grey and silver suit that was tailored perfectly. He looked at me as though I were a fascinating creature and greeted me warmly. Josh asked if the doctor had champagne, which he had, and we drank; the champagne made me feel posh and like I was floating. I thought only in New York could you start your night with a broke, broken person drinking a “hairy asshole" and then, later, end up in a limo drinking hundred-dollar champagne with a renowned doctor.

For the first time in a while, guns and death were not present in my mind. It was a night of many firsts; I did my first body shot, I threw up out of a town car, and I danced in an apartment that was fancy enough for a Rockefeller. I didn’t realize how many inhibitions I had until they were lessened by alcohol.

By early morning, the party had thinned out to just the three of us, and I realized it was almost time for our audition, which brought reality with sobering power: we were still drunk and would be late. Seeing my panic, Zachy, known as Dr. Big, called the car to get us.

I said, “Josh, we look awful.”

Our makeup was smeared, and it looked like we had been up all night. I couldn’t believe that I would blow my chances like this.

However, I may have been overly worried because Josh was the charmer. He introduced me to everyone as one of his closest friends, as if we had known each other for over a day. Then, I joked with the judges and caught up with everyone. I found that Josh had enough personality to change perceptions, and some of this sparkle was transferred to me.

When the long day was over, we got in that white van with everyone else, and he sat next to me and whispered in my ear. I never had a friend, but now he has made me feel popular.

When we got back to the hotel, we got ready for dinner. Josh barged in on me and saw my bandage, which had a fair amount of blood on it, and he said, “Oh my gosh, Mary. What happened to you?”

I told him, “I don’t want to talk about it.”

He hugged me and started to cry. Perhaps it was his persona that he was this social butterfly, always seeking fun and adventure, and being more superficial. Still, his actions usually betray this by showing empathy and depth.

I patted his back and then shut the door.

After my shower, he was sitting on his bed with a dress in his hand. He said, “I got this for you. My friend brought it up earlier.”

It was a tight, light mauve dress. I put it on, and he applied a cream-colored eyeshadow with bold eyeliner and gave me a braid to one side. I loved the way I looked. Josh wore a suit with a bow tie to match my dress.

Then we headed to dinner at a lovely restaurant and sat outside in a tiny botanical garden. There were forty-eight hopefuls, but by tomorrow, there would be ten fewer after the first cut. Before cutting, they wanted to celebrate making it this far. Josh interacted with everyone, and I felt like I belonged more.

It was lovely until dessert, when I noticed a man watching us creepily. I pointed him out to Josh, who became pale and said, “That’s Kennan.”

I asked, “Did you know he was coming?”

Josh looked down and said, “He’s shown up places that I am, but I don’t want to talk to him; I can’t believe his selfish, empty promises any longer, and I can’t afford to cry anymore.”

I mentioned that this seemed like stalking and that he should report it to someone, but he shrugged it off. After some time, Josh went to ask him to leave.

When Josh came back, he looked devastated; it was apparent that seeing Keenan brought up a range of intense emotions. It’s challenging to heal a wound when it's repeatedly opened.

As Josh returned, the ballet official informed us that if we were chosen to continue, we would find a tiny porcelain ballet slipper with our name engraved on it by our hotel door. If not, we were to keep the dream alive and be proud of having gotten this far.

In a serendipitous twist, as we left and passed, we noticed Zachy and his gorgeous wife, Nellie, eating. Seeing us, he waved us over and introduced us to his soft-spoken wife, who seemed very glad to meet us. We didn’t want to miss our ride, so we quickly said goodbye, got into the van, and headed to the hotel.

I did not expect to be chosen after my performance, but I also didn’t have time to obsess over it because I was on “Mr. Josh’s Insane Ride,” so I was shocked when there were two slippers for us at our door. When we saw these, we hugged each other tightly.

Once in our room, we received a call from the lobby stating that I had mail, which I thought might have been from my mother, since I hadn’t called or checked in.

**Part Two: Elancer**

When we got to the lobby, the card was from Kalvis; it said, “You deserve someone who is there for you, and if you’d let me, then I would always be.” I couldn’t believe the sentiment, considering I hadn’t had any real interactions with him aside from that horrible day; yet, he said the words that I had always wanted to hear.

Josh saw the surprise on my face and asked if I had a secret admirer, to which I replied that I didn’t, but didn’t offer up much more. He said, “Sure looks like a loving card, at least on the outside!”

The outside of the card was ballet slippers positioned in the shape of a heart with the words, “All My Love.” It was a perfect choice of a card, yet a cruel joke, as I had found exactly what I always wanted, but was now unable to have it. I didn’t know what to say, so I said, “Ummm. I need to think it over; it’s complicated.”

He grabbed my hand, said, “Enough said,” and meant it because he lived it. I was glad Josh left his problematic relationship because my father's actions taught me one thing: people seldom change, and if they were trying to change, they’d be doing the work; neither did.

Even though we had not been gone long, upon our return to the room, it was vandalized; our clothes were cut up, the room was spray-painted, and all of our breakable items were broken. It was alarming and terrifying.

I said, “We need to go, Josh,” worried that the intruder could still be there.

We rushed down to the lobby, where we explained, over labored breathing, that an unknown person had destroyed our hotel room, which was met with disbelief. The presidential suite has its own private floor, so you would need a key card to access that floor in addition to the room. Incredulous, the manager asked, “Are you sure you two just didn’t get a little too drunk?”

Josh answered, “No way, man. This isn’t messy, it’s been vandalized.”

Still not believing us, the manager accompanied us to the room; he was shocked at what he saw and asked, “Did you guys invite anyone up here or leave your keys anywhere?”

We both said “No” because we didn’t want to be liable, but the truth was that we had left our key cards in our belongings at the auditions; many people had access to them, but nothing valuable was missing. This felt personal, yet it was baffling because I couldn’t imagine Peter Pan had an enemy in the world, and no one knew me.

The manager looked skeptical and said, “I’m going to have to call the police, so you need to leave for a while, and I’ll need those key cards for the time being.”

We both handed them over and headed to the elevator. “What the fuck?” Josh asked.

Still in shock, I said, “I can’t believe it, but the cops will be able to use the surveillance video and catch them. Oh, shit! I forgot… Our pointe shoes were destroyed. Those took me forever to get right. Now, what are we going to do?”

Josh had backups at home, but I didn’t; he saw my panic and replied, “Maybe we can find someone your size who will lend you some.”

He knew this wasn’t the same thing, and I wanted to say as much, but he was trying to be helpful, so I thought better. There was so much added pressure, and I needed a break. That is when I noticed the fear that used to put me in deep depression, cowering, was turning to rage; I felt afraid of what I was capable of.

While the police conducted their investigation, we pursued finding some shoes that were somewhat worn in. Josh called up the doctor, Zachy, and his car service added us to his route home. When we got in the car, the very affable Zachy greeted us. Zachy was much like the older brother that I wished I had. I felt terrible that I was in a mood and met his warmth with ice, but I couldn’t speak because I was fuming.

After a moment, Zachy asked, “Are you ok?”

I started crying out of anger so that I couldn't answer; instead, Josh described what had happened and our current mission.

In response, Zachy said, “Oh, damn… That’s horrible. I’m so sorry.”

Zachy’s words started to coax me out of the darkness because they were so sincere and comforting. I was inclined to say, “It’s ok,” but that would be a lie I’d told a billion times, and I was sick of telling it; it wasn’t ok; it was far from it. So instead, I said, “It’s horrible, but it feels like there’s nothing I can do to change any of it.”

Zachy hugged me and said, “I know; this world has become a cruel and inconsiderate place. I want to share a story about my wife, as I know you can relate to it.

“My wife has always enjoyed walking at night after I get home from work, as we have two kids who are full of life, so she enjoys the peace. About a year ago, this guy came up from behind and attacked her; he brutally beat and raped her. Nessie was later found by another woman who was also taking a walk and called the police. “They had to put Nessie into a medical coma because her brain was so swollen, and they were confident she was going to die. Yet, my connection to Raymond Myers, a world-renowned doctor, would alter our lives forever.

“When Raymond and I were all in college, our girlfriends were close, so we saw each other quite a bit. He initially attended an engineering program, which he completed, followed by an artificial intelligence program, and ultimately pursued his medical doctorate. He was in college before me and stayed for some time after me. Many people thought he was indecisive or restless; the running joke was that he would be the first man to start college and stay until he died, breaking the world record for most degrees held. However, we later discovered that this was by design, as he had planned to push the medical field into science fiction novel territory and later did.

“I always liked Raymond, but he was so driven that it seemed the only topics of discussion felt like lectures and often went over my head; I am smart, but this man was Einstein-level intelligent. He certainly met his match with his girlfriend, Valori, who later became a pioneer in the aeronautics field. Their communication with each other and the world was baffling but often endearing. Most importantly, she didn’t mind their little time together because she also had little time to give. I believed there were never two people more meant for each other than these two.

“We all lost touch later, especially since my ex-girlfriend Rona and I had parted ways amicably, and I graduated. I was surprised when I received a wedding invitation from Val and Ray, which would be held at NASA. I never felt that he and I were so close that he would remember and invite me. But I found that the little time we spent together was much of his spare time, and I was accommodating and kind enough to put a man who was hardly at ease at ease.

“Valori walked down the aisle to beautiful piano music in her cream-colored dress with a bouquet of grey and coral roses while Raymond waited for her in a dark grey tux with coral accents, with tears falling from his eyes. When she reached him, she instinctively swung her arms around him, pulled him into her, and held him momentarily. They were a team and knew what to do for each other without words. I felt something was missing for some time, but I couldn’t put my finger on it, no matter how obvious it should have been, until their wedding day. This was a pivotal moment; something about the scene moved me deeply.

“That became my focus from that day forward; I knew I might be setting myself up for failure using their love as an example, and it sort of did, as I was never one to settle because that felt more like losing than winning, but the more time went on, the more I started to think that what I was hoping for was likely impossible and that settling meant having something to my current nothing, so isn’t that a win? And yet, I couldn’t seem to be able to settle down with any of the brilliant and talented women that I courted in those years. I think it was because I instinctively knew that my soulmate was out there, and I knew I would be able to tell when I met her.

“I was about to make a huge mistake and propose to my most recent ex, who was not right for me. I wanted children, and I was lonely, so it seemed like my best shot, but before I could make the call that I had been mulling over, by divine intervention, I met Nessie; she was French and the new head nurse assigned to my team before I had my private practice. There was something so charming about her, and she was always so entertained by me; I did things intentionally, like say, “You mean to tell me filling should be done alphabetically and not by where you find a free space?” Her eyes would bug out, and she would say, ‘Whhhhaaaaatttt?’ while I kept a straight face.

“My work had always been important, but after Nessie started working with me, I was excited to go to work and giddy while there; we were a dynamic duo. I knew she didn’t wear a wedding ring or have photographs of children at her station, but since we never discussed anything personal, I didn’t know much about her personal life. So, one day, I asked my buddy, Jeff, who worked under her, and he told me she was unattached but ‘very by the books.’ He explained her career was very important to her, so she would never date someone where people could say she advanced based on anything but her skill and devotion, which I understood. I asked if he thought she would like someone like me, and he said, ‘She hasn’t said anything, but the only time I ever see her laugh or smile is at you.’ That’s all I needed to hear; I resigned that day.

“I realized that starting over from the bottom again would be difficult; it would set me back a few years, so it was a massive gamble for someone I was unsure would even date me, but running it repeatedly, I always ended up back at, ‘How could I not take the chance?’ Nothing about her felt like settling to me; she was my dream girl. She was everything, and I was in love with her.

“I knew I made the right decision when, during those weeks, you could tell she was somber; there weren’t many people who could penetrate her extreme shyness and unwind her a bit.

“Then, a few days after my last day, I sent her coral roses and asked her to meet me for dinner at 7 pm at a fancy French restaurant.

“I got to the restaurant an hour early because I didn’t want anything to go wrong, and for that hour, my mind was running crazy. My close buddy Rick’s words about believing I made a mistake kept running in my head; he said, ‘Fantasies are only great because they don’t include the reality of relationships, which include fights, compromise, and routine.’ He believed I would lose it all for a fantasy that evaporated as quickly as it formed, but I didn’t care; I was drawn to her, and the strength of feeling was irresistible.

“I was elated when she entered the restaurant fifteen minutes early. I was sitting further back, so I got to absorb her walking towards me, and it felt like it was in slow motion. She wore a lovely, form-fitting dress with a boat neck, featuring coloring akin to a watercolor painting, with soft colors and a soft focus; it made her a living work of art. Her hair was lovely; she took the time to style it in a fancy bun with her side bangs out and softly curled hair. If there were one moment that I could relive forever, this would be it. We had so much separation, but it closed as she walked towards me, and I knew I would do everything to keep her close.

“Then she was before me, and I jumped up to get her chair. She told me that she was surprised that I asked her out. I said, ‘How could I not? You light me up; you make me happy.’ She then realized the reason and timing of my resignation; it hadn’t occurred to her that someone would sacrifice so much for someone who could reject you. She was touched that I had never crossed the line in our professional life, and in doing so, I had to make a choice, and I chose her. She grabbed my hand, which was a sign that it was all worth it; she was exactly who I had hoped she would be.

“We talked all night long in the lovely candle-lit restaurant that was made to look like catacombs. We both loved our families and enjoyed spending time with them; hers lived overseas, but they took turns visiting each other. She designed her clothes, including her dress. I had an affinity for obscure sports and games, and sometimes created and developed my own. I even claimed I could become a millionaire from my original board game, ‘Nine Cats and Ghost.’ She laughed, then realized I was serious, and squeezed my hand.

She wanted marriage and kids, but like me, school and career had taken priority. She was pretty shy, but my outgoing personality was enough to coax her out of her shyness.

“She later came home with me, played ‘Nine Cats and a Ghost,’ and asked me, ‘Are you out of your mind?’ Eight hours later, when she understood the complicated game, she enjoyed it for what it was. That night was our first and last ‘Goodbye,’ and we kept getting closer. We laughed so much; we were a team, picking up the slack for each other; we comforted and supported each other. Even Rick, our harshest critic, became our biggest fan. He had been cynical about love because his ‘one true love’ shredded his heart with her dismissiveness, so he became jaded. I was sure there was no coming back for him; he would be a grumpy older man alone, but then we softened his heart. He saw that sometimes, when you take a big chance, you get an enormous reward. Most importantly, you can give your heart away without it being stomped on; instead, you can find someone who makes you incredibly happy.

“Rick actually met his future wife, Tiffany, out with us as our permanent third wheel. It was at the ballet, which my wife loves more than anything. He was indecisive between Reese’s Pieces and Popcorn when this little hippie chick asked him if he’d ever had Reese’s Pieces melted onto popcorn, which he hadn’t. She then asked the man at the concession stand to put Reese’s on the popcorn and throw it into the warmer; he raised an eyebrow, shrugged, and then complied. She called it ‘Orgasm Popcorn’ and invited herself to sit with us, asking the person next to him to move. She was a unique person, assertive yet fun. They never went back to eating the treats separately or being separated from each other. She was so pushy that his inclination to push away was no match. He told me a week later, ‘Man… She moved in, and I said, ‘Oh, shit. I’m sorry. What are you going to do?’ Rick laughed and said, ‘No. I love it. She’s always dragging me somewhere and entering my bubble. She smothers me, but I love it.’

“We grew to love Tiffany just as much, especially my wife, who looked at her like she was an alien; Tiffany was forceful and bold and would talk to anyone, which was quite different from my wife’s shy, accommodating personality, but opposites can complement. I believe Tiffany looked at my wife with the same wonder and enjoyed her softness. We made a great group. Rick knew he would marry her when she won ‘Nine Cats and a Ghost’ the first time she played it and set a time record. When we were all shocked, Tiffany said, ‘Well, I’ve been a woman for thirty years and worked in construction for eleven years.’

“None of us knew what that meant because the game had nothing to do with either, but we didn’t want to seem stupid or question her, so we agreed. Rick asked Tiffany to marry him the next day after a brief courtship. He gave her his grandmother’s very clear, circular diamond, which she said ‘looked like a crystal ball’ and that she ‘saw raunchy sex in the near future.’ She kept him constantly entertained, and he provided her with stability. She insisted they get married on a plane and jump out after, so the officiant married them, and then we watched as they came to the ground; she was partying the whole time, and he was screaming all the way down.

“When Nessie and I had our little girl, you’d swear that this was Tiffany’s child, as she was strong-willed, assertive, and always entertaining. Tiffany, formerly against having children, fell in love with our little girl and changed her hard stance. Strangely enough, they had a little girl who was much more like my soft and sweet wife, and oddly enough, the little girls mirrored their own endearing friendship. Then Tiffany became pregnant again with a little boy, and we followed a year later with our own little boy. Those two boys became the best of friends and were inseparable.

“Once we had our children, we settled into the life and family routine. Our careers were going well, with Tiffany making the most of us in sales, likely because she would not take ‘no’ for an answer.

“When I lost my father to cancer, it tore me apart, but Nessie supported me. I also looked at my little boy and realized I was passing on traditions from my father. It was the cycle of life, but I couldn’t have done it without my friends and family.

“Then Tiffany and Rick’s little boy got hit on his bike by a drunk driver, and he lost one of his legs. This tore Rick apart, as he expressed that selfishly, he had athletic dreams for his son. But true to form, Tiffany got involved with the Special Olympics, and then they both became very enthusiastic about it; she found a solution to the pain. They started training him early and showed him that it was a superpower, not a hindrance.

“Life deals so randomly; sometimes, you end up with rewards and success, while other times, you end up with nothing or loss, but if you have the right people by your side and love, no matter what is dealt with, you walk away together.

“When I got the call about my wife’s attack, it was the most terrifying experience of my life. I called Tiffany and Rick, and they watched the kids while I raced to her. I walked right past her room because of how badly she was beaten; she was unrecognizable. This man didn’t want to incapacitate her or kill her, but to destroy her; this monster kept going even as she begged for her life, and he beat her even after he believed she was dead. I wanted to find him and torture him.

“When I was directed to her and approached, I noticed her face was enlarged and beaten, with her eyes swollen shut, and they had to shave her hair. This wasn’t my wife looking beaten; there was nothing discernible. I held her hand, then fell to my knees, and I cried. I thought, “How could this have been avoided?” I know there are predators, but you can’t focus on that and keep a knife ready, because then you wouldn’t be enjoying life and would be constantly stressed. My beautiful watercolor wife was now black, blue, yellow, swollen, and hanging onto life.

“Right after my arrival, the doctor told me they had to put her in a medical coma. He said there wasn’t a great chance of survival, but they had to take her to surgery. He said I had one minute and knew it could be my last, so I thought about her laughing at work when I asked, ‘Do you need to file every time? Have you ever done file roulette?’ Her jaw-dropping saying, “Whhhaaaat’?’ And then I thought about her walking into our last first date, our intimate wedding, and our children. There is so much good. I couldn’t let it go. I’d give anything to save her, including my own life. As the tapes of our life together ran in my head, they interrupted to take her to surgery, and my body’s response was to grasp her hand and not let go, and it was not conscious.

“That’s when Rick showed up, grabbed me, and said, ‘Hey, man… Hey, man.’

“Then, he swung his arms around me, and we cried. After we started crying, neither of us could stop. He loved her, and she was part of their family as well. Then time froze. And as he held me, my former thoughts of our life together turned dark. What would I do without her? What would our children do without her? I had never considered losing her.

“After a while, Rick led me to the waiting room, and we sat there in silence because I couldn’t speak; I was in shock. Rick went and got coffee for us, and after finishing the drink, I told him through tears, “Rick, she was attacked during her nightly walk. I don’t go because I care for the kids, and she’s done so many times and has never had problems. He raped her, then beat her and left her for dead.”

“He hadn’t heard all of the details, so he thought she had an accident or maybe had been hit and run, but nothing like this. He was speechless. ‘Oh my God,’ he said.

Rick then put his head in his hands and absorbed the horrible information. You could tell he was putting himself in my shoes and imagining life without the person who brought him so much happiness and love.

“Now, all we could do was wait, and that was hell. She could very much live or die, with a much lower chance of the former. So, I did all the things that people in that position do: begged, prayed, pleaded, promised, and cried; I couldn’t stop crying.

“Five hours later, they came out and said that what they had done wasn’t improving her condition, and they were going to put her on life support. The doctor said they could try a few things, but “They find direct communication is the best way to handle this.” They didn’t want to give false hope, so they didn’t provide it. The doctor said we should go home and get some rest because things wouldn’t change, and they would call if they did. There was no way I was leaving, but I told Rick that he should, to which he replied, “No fucking way.” He was always there for the best of times and wouldn’t leave my side during the worst.

“Then, when the 6 AM news came on, it just got worse for me as they reported what happened to my wife. The news story stated, “Woman attacked and beaten while on a walk and in critical condition. The police report that one witness saw a man running from the area, but it was dark; the man was approximately 150 pounds and wearing a grey beanie. The police are asking for information.” It was surreal; I had watched stories like this hundreds of times, but seeing the news about my wife was beyond belief. Rick fell asleep shortly after the news story, and I joined him unintentionally. Two hours later, the physician in charge of my wife’s care tapped me on the shoulder and invited me to his office, which scared the hell out of me. I’d lost patients during surgery, so I had seen this from the other side. That walk was terrifying. Your mind goes numb out of survival, and you only feel disbelief.

“Once we had reached his office, he sat me down, and I held my breath while he said, ‘Zachy… we got a call from Doctor Raymond Myers, and we were quite shocked; he’s idolized here. He said you both were close friends and that he would fly here and offer you a trial that could save your wife’s life. We were not going to advise keeping her on life support, but if you are interested in this, we will.’

“Myers must have seen the news. It was strange to see someone I wouldn’t even think to tell about this come rushing in to help.

“The doctor continued, ‘He will be here at 2 pm. Our team will be in touch with you afterward. I want you to go home and return here by 3 pm. I want you well-rested to be clear-headed to make this decision.’

“That stuck with me as I drove home; why would I need to consider this decision? There was no other option. It was just way too much for one person.

“When I got home, Tiffany and the kids were having breakfast. Tiffany’s eyes were red and watery, but the kids didn’t catch on as they ate their “Fruit Loops.” I decided I wouldn’t tell them until things were clearer; there was no sense in telling them now. I went to my bedroom; Tiffany followed and said, ‘I’m so sorry, Zachy.’

“She then threw her arms around me, and I melted into her like a scared child needing comfort from his mother.

“After some time, she broke the embrace and told me to get some sleep. She assured me the kids were going to her mom’s house with her and would stay there as long as I needed.

“When she left, I didn’t want to sleep, but I felt so drained that my troubled mind was no match. In my dream, I was dancing in a crystal ball with my wife as we traveled from clouds to the stars to the sea, impenetrable and perfect. We never spoke; we just looked into each other’s eyes and felt all the feelings. In the peak of those feelings, our divine dance paused; we looked around and found that someone had a grasp of the clear orb, and the hands now concealed the light, leaving us in darkness.

“My wife pulled me down and cradled herself into my arms, something she did, not consciously, when she was experiencing uncertainty or fear. During these times, she would revert to a child and look to me to reassure her that everything would be okay. I’d hold her, and after some time in the embrace, she would leave and figure it out, having just needed the momentary protection; all I wanted to do was make her safe. I loved those moments because they revealed a part of her that she didn’t reveal often.

“Then, tightly wound in each other, the hands started to lift and exposed who held us; it was a giant Doctor Myers. The dream ended when her words broke our silence, ‘Don’t let me go,’ and then she disappeared. I was alone in the ball and then on my bed.

“When I got up, the house was silent, as everyone had left. There were messages from Rick asking if he could drive me and checking in on me. I declined the ride. I was glad to have the support when needed, but I just wanted to be alone.

“The drive was hard; I kept thinking about our options, but then returning to the dream. I didn’t want to leave her. I didn’t want her to leave me. How could I go on? I couldn’t go on; it was that simple. We were now two parts that could never work without the other; she was my heart, and I was her lungs. Life is so much more than success, career, possessions, and appearance; it's really about magic - this unseen feeling that brings real life into the living. It’s that feeling deep inside of you; it's not science, but magic. The tears kept coming, but I knew that I had to compose myself because I needed to be strong for her and find a way to make sure she survived this; I’d do anything to save her.”

Josh abruptly stopped the story. “Hey! I’m sorry, Doc. We passed where we needed to go a long way back. I didn’t want to interrupt you, but if we don’t get there soon, we can kiss those shoes goodbye.”

Zachy smiled and said, “I understand. We will catch up soon, I hope.”

I wanted to stay because I felt safe and comforted for the first time in a long time, as he had a certain way about him. It was what I had silently wished for many times in my life, and I wanted him to cradle me and tell me that everything would be all right. It was impossible to listen to Zachy’s story about his wife and not feel certain feelings radiate through me. I let the secret feelings wash over me as Kal’s eyes appeared, looking into mine. He begged me to stay awake and stay with him. This was a man who damn near got violent trying to get me aid. Those complicated feelings made me feel like I was shutting down, but then part of me was grateful that Zach’s story allowed me to feel and remember those things that I had suppressed, because I wanted to remember no part of 11/11.

I was pulled from my trance when Josh said, “Hey! We’re here.”

Then he grabbed my hand, and we walked into the building. I always thought I didn’t mind my life being on the outside looking in, but my time with Josh made me realize I was lying to myself; I spent my life hiding from my father’s wrath, so I created my world to escape to, but I had to flee so often that I became so different from everyone else; it wasn’t that I didn’t want to have friends, but that I was incapable. Once I entered that world enough, it seemed there would be no leaving, so time moved forward, and I drifted farther from normalcy and deeper into isolation. I would’ve never sought friendship out, but I didn’t need to seek him out because he didn’t give me any choice but to befriend him. He was the only person who could have called me a friend, because the qualities that made me a freak to everyone else made me interesting and valuable to him.

Once through the doors, Josh exclaimed, “Kristen! Hey girl. I heard you got married to Drew. I love the new do. What size shoe are you?”

I must mention this was in the middle of their dance practice. I was shocked when he burst in instead of waiting. She answered after a moment because I believe her initial reaction was irritation, but something about him made it impossible to be angry at him. He was so unintentionally, authentically himself, and well-meaning, so you felt guilty if you lost your patience at whatever nutty or invasive thing he was doing. The ballet instructor introduced the man, interrupting her class, saying, “Josh… Class… Class… Josh.”

Josh greeted them slyly and charmingly, which had the usual disarming effect.

The instructor said, “I’m a size eight, Josh; why do you ask?”

He replied, “Some psycho broke into our hotel room, and they ruined her shoes, among many things. She needs shoes that are broken in for tryouts.”

I thought the description was funny, coming from the psycho who forged his way into my room to start with.

The instructor replied, “Oh damn. I’m sorry to hear that.”

He then said that I was a size five and extended this out to anyone else. Moments later, we heard, “I’m a size five,” from a petite dancer with a trendy A-line bob that lay perfectly, something my unruly hair could never pull off. She ran to the back room and grabbed a pair of shoes, and Josh slipped one on my foot; the fit was so perfect that I could swear they were my shoes. Josh smiled and said, “If the shoe fits! We will bring them back to you.”

She smiled back and said, “Keep them. I have plenty. I like to keep so many backups.”

Then, realizing we had already taken up so much time, he said, “Thank you! Goodbye! See you soon,” and blew a kiss to the class.

Then Josh called Zachy, who sent his town car for us, but to my disappointment, he was not in it. Once we were situated in the car, Josh pulled out a flask, and I thought he might have alcoholism, especially seeing as we were not planning on going anywhere that a flask would be necessary or appropriate. He offered me the flask after he took a long swig from it, but I said, “I have had enough ‘hairy asshole’ for a lifetime.”

He gave me a devious Cheshire grin and said, “Can one, though? But no, this is different, you’ll like it more. I call this ‘The Cooky Cunt!’”

He beamed with pride as though this would sell me on it. I declined again, but he did not take my refusal. Instead, he said, “Oh, come on… This one is cherry cream and chocolate liquor.”

Cardinal cherries are one of my favorite treats. I found I was not good with peer pressure because I hadn’t ever had a peer pressure me, so I took the flask and I swallowed a fair amount, expecting the liquid form of my favorite treat, but I was very wrong; with my mouth on fire, I said, “Holy shit! That’s hot as hell. What the fuck?”

Josh said, “That’s the ghost pepper I added. You didn’t think there would be a twist with something that had cooky in the name?”

I didn’t expect that, but I did expect that if ghost pepper were an ingredient in anything, it would be mentioned.

After the drink of hellfire, my uptight personality wanted to be difficult, but I laughed instead. And we both finished the bottle, and then he slammed the water from his messenger bag. Then, feeling some of my inhibitions lower, my mind started to speak, which was unusual, as my thoughts and words were usually screened and discarded.

Then, I said, “Do you ever feel like you know that life is nearly limitless and vast, but you feel stuck in just one spot? Like you know, you could leave and might be able to, but you can’t. I have this dream, but not anything else. I can’t move.”

He put his arm around me and said, “Well, you’re here, and that’s huge. Did you start with Pointe or work up to it? You take one step at a time toward your goal; before long, you will see that you are not tied down. What is it that you want aside from ballet?”

I thought about that and said, “I wish I felt like I belonged and had friends. I wish I were bolder and less afraid, like you. But most of all, I wish that I felt free.”

He pulled me in tighter and said, “Well, you’re drinking a ‘Cooky Cunt’ with your best friend, so I’d say you're moving forward. You’re not going to have to walk alone anymore.”

After bonding, he opened all the windows, and we finished the flask while viewing New York from a different perspective. Josh had a way of making you forget reality, even harsher ones. New York is beautiful, and there’s so much activity and life. The alcohol made it easier not to obsess over my past, present, and future, so I wondered if Josh was using the alcohol for this reason. In many ways, Josh was not hard to get to know, as he cared little for boundaries and enjoyed talking more than anyone alive; yet, he was impossible to truly know, because there were many times when I felt he was presenting a persona rather than his actual self. If we all wear masks at times, he was wearing layered masks at all times, so even if you peeled one off, another would be exposed.

There was some silence while taking it all in, which I could tell eventually became disconcerting to him, so Josh pulled out another flask; he was like a magician pulling an endless number of rabbits out of his hat. I took a large drink without asking what was in it; I assumed it was something like “The Sweaty Balls,” consisting of Fireball, Raspberry Liquor, and Mayonnaise. But he showed me that he was not to be predicted, as this tasted quite nice. I said, “This is really good. What is it?”

He smiled, “That, my friend, is a $2000 bottle of whiskey I stole.”

And he sprinkled me with magic dust, and I levitated.

Then we reached our stop, and the world seemed to be spinning. We went to the front desk and asked if we could go to our room. The desk clerk spoke into this walkie-talkie for the manager, who came minutes later and didn’t seem amused at our drunkenness. He said, “We are switching your room until we get the cameras fixed for your safety.”

My heart sank because that video was our only hope, considering we had no clue who had done it. Josh asked for the key cards, and the manager handed them over. Josh looked disappointed at the basic accommodations, which prompted the manager to offer us a few bottles of nice champagne and a couple of dinner vouchers for their four-star restaurant, which perked him up.

I asked the manager, “So, do they know who destroyed that room?”

It was clear to me that the manager thought we were the perpetrators or somehow involved in the incident. But many of the cameras were malfunctioning, so he had no way to prove it, and we had no answers. The manager said, “There are no updates, but the police are looking into it.”

Josh and I got settled into our much more intimate room, and even though the first cut would happen tomorrow, we popped the champagne. He decided we would leave because Josh said, “It holds such a bad energy right now.” There was a part of me that wanted to stay and focus, but then there was a newer part of myself that wanted to go, because I understood what I was missing in life, and I loved that missing piece far more than I could have ever expected. So I agreed to go with him.

He called Zachy, who was out, but allowed us to use his car service. I asked, “Where are we going, Josh?”

He smiled and said, “A house party. We can borrow some clothes and get ready there.”

I had never been so drunk in my whole life, and we were starting like that, going to a party. As we headed out of the lobby, we both had an open bottle of champagne in our possession, much to the manager’s chagrin; you could tell he could not wait until our stay was over, as we caused more problems than he had experienced in quite a while. However, Josh’s overly confident and dramatic personality allowed him to avoid being challenged much, as it would only cause the challenger more trouble than it was worth. And the car arrived quickly anyway. We climbed in, and Josh put his head in my lap, and I stroked his hair.

Then, the alcohol started to open me up more, and I said, “Josh, I have begun to think about Kal often. Kal was so different; I finally had someone there when I was terrified, not someone causing the terror; that is impactful, more than I could express. It seems cruel that I finally found someone truly good, but I am too haunted even to try.”

Josh replied, “I was going to mention that I’ve had the front desk hold the flowers he’s been sending because I thought it would upset you; I could read between the lines. I do know about love that’s intertwined with something darker. Do you think you could get past it together with time?”

I said I didn’t think so, and he replied, “Maybe you should try. ”

Then, in his eyes and voice, I saw a glimpse of what he was running from; I thought about it the rest of the ride.

My deep thoughts were broken when the driver said, “Hey, do you guys know that man in the black Dodge Ram behind us? He’s been behind us for a while, and I even tried to lose him, but he has continued to follow us.”

We both looked back, and Josh had a facial expression of recognition, but his words said he did not know the person, and I did not. I became convinced Josh knew him when his behavior changed as he clammed up and became distant. I didn’t push it because I figured he never pushed me. Instead, we both held hands and let our minds float off into their own worlds. Before we knew it, we were there, and Josh grabbed my hand and pulled me out forcefully as the black truck passed us by.

When we got into the brownstone, Josh perked up, not out of happiness but out of the need to pretend to be. He said, “Hey, girl! Amber, this is my best friend, Mary. Can we borrow some things and get ready in your room?”

The wealthy bohemian said, “Of course.”

Josh led me to her room, and we found dresses we liked. He did my makeup again, and I felt beautiful. Then we finished the champagne and lay on the bed until we heard a woman screaming, “Oh my God! Oh my fucking God!”

We ran to see what was happening. It was the friendly owner cradling her dead dog, which had been run over and then lay in front of her house, but whoever left him there didn’t stick around. The dog was mangled and bloody, which was enough to sober us up. Josh held her, then said, “I’m so sorry. This is horrible. I can’t believe someone would leave him here like this.”

The owner continued sobbing as more people arrived; this was the last thing the partygoers had expected, and they were horrified. Some stayed to comfort her, while others found it to be too depressing and took their leave. We waited until she asked everyone to leave, and Josh called the car service.

Unfortunately, Zachy was now using the car, so we would need to bide our time. So we went to a bar that looked too expensive for us, but Josh explained that he knew one of the bartenders who would hook us up. The bar was dimly lit with fancy chandeliers hung everywhere, and the interior and decor were black. We drank cocktails, relaxed, and then went through some doors that led to a club, where the music was booming and the dance floor was packed. We moved to the dance floor, and he started to spin me around. I was too drunk to spin, so after some of that, I fell, and we got bounced by security. Josh made a scene the whole way out, which made the person who “hooked us up” sorry that he had.

Moving away from the club, I said, “I miss Kal.”

Josh saw me looking forlorn and said, “You should check out what he left for you upfront. Love is such a wonderful thing, but it’s a ‘Rubik’s Cube,’ as it is so frustrating at times that you want to pull it apart with pliers and reconstruct it. But love also allows you to stick with it in hopes that one day you will correctly solve it and feel accomplished and glad you didn’t give up. Unfortunately, I have so many unfinished cubes that my closet is full of them. I think you should consider the worst-case scenario. Would you be any worse?”

I paused, then replied, “Did you consider if it doesn’t work out, Josh? It would be much worse.”

He pulled me in and said, “Did you ever consider what if it worked out?”

**Part Three: Sauter**

Before I could respond, the town car showed up, and we got in. It wasn’t long after we started towards the hotel that our car got rammed hard. I was wearing my seat belt, but was propelled forward so hard it cut into me and hit my alcohol-filled gut so intensely that I projectile vomited all over the vehicle. Josh was not wearing his seatbelt and flew hard into the seat in front of him, then back. His nose was broken, so there was blood everywhere. I was too stunned to do or say anything until the sound of the car’s horn blaring finally snapped me out of it. Josh’s face looked horrific, and he took his shirt off and tried to stop the immense blood coming from his face. Then, with a muffled voice, he said, “Holy fucking shit.”

He then realized the horn was from our car. He crawled forward to peer into the front and said, “Hey… Sir… Sir… Sir, are you ok?”

Josh looked back at me with panic in his eyes.

I said, “Josh, what is going on? Is that man ok?”

Instead of answering, Josh went to get up, but he did not realize he had broken his ribs, so instead, he screamed in pain. He said, “Mary, you must call an ambulance.”

He threw me his phone, which had landed on the floor. I asked, “Josh! Is that man ok?”

He looked at me with the same terror his voice betrayed and said, “The horn… That’s his body pressed against the steering wheel, and he isn’t responding, so it’s not looking good.”

I called for an ambulance and recapped all of our injuries. The 911 operator asked if I could move without injuring myself and if I felt I had a neck or back injury. I told her I didn’t think so. She then told me to go to the driver and give him aid.

Then, the violence that I had somewhat suppressed sprang back to the forefront, and the ghosts surrounded me. I cried, “I don’t think I can. I do know how.”

Assertively, she said, “You can. I’ll walk you through it. You are in the heart of New York; it can take time to get to you. You may save this man’s life. You need to. I believe in you,” so I would have to walk through my ghosts to get to him.

As I unattached my seatbelt, my father was screaming at me; I walked past him. As I went over the row of seats, I was eye to eye with the violent man who ruined my life; I moved beyond him. When I opened the door, he pointed his gun at me, and I felt the same amount of fear that I felt at the time of the shooting, so I froze. But then the voice on the phone said, “You can do this.”

I had no choice, so I pushed through them all with their guns and screaming all around me.

Once I reached the driver’s door, I grabbed the handle and pulled; the physical pain I felt was excruciating. The driver was collapsed on the steering wheel, as Josh had said. While I looked at the driver, the voice on the phone said, “Are you there?”

I replied, “Yes. He’s slumped over the steering wheel.”

She asked, “Is he breathing?”

Through tears, I said, “I don’t know.”

She calmly replied, “Put your ear next to his head. Do you feel anything?”

I said, “No.”

That’s when a man ran over to us and said he was a former combat medic. He dragged the driver to the ground and started giving CPR. I updated the operator.

Sometime later, the man told me that he was running out of steam, as many years had passed since his army days, and I would need to take a turn. He said, “I’ll walk you through it. I’ll be right here. I’m not going to leave you.”

And so I breathed for a man who currently could not breathe for himself while a stranger encouraged me. But what do you do when ghosts are strong enough that they are nearly living? Yet I stayed focused during this, but the man didn’t improve.

As I worked, I noticed Daniel, my teacher, and fellow students’ bodies began to lie beside us. I kept it up until I started to struggle. Seeing this, the kind stranger tapped in.

When the ambulance finally arrived, they loaded the driver and Josh up, and then the lights flashed and danced until they disappeared.

Once they were out of sight, the man said, “You did good, kid… I’m Blake.”

Shaking his hand, I realized I was hurt and probably should have gone in the ambulance. Still, I introduced myself, thanked him, and scurried away. I hoped Josh would contact Zachy, but I wasn’t sure, so I felt compelled to try to contact him and get to the hospital. I figured it couldn’t be hard to find him, and it wasn’t. When the phone rang, his wife, Nessie, answered. I explained the situation, and she said, “Oh my god! My dear, I am devastated for you all. Zachy is on call and had an emergency. When he is out of surgery, I will message him to contact me.”

Her accent and concern were soothing. I got off the phone quickly and went on a quest to find the hospital. But the more I moved, the more apparent my injuries became to me. Tomorrow was crucial, but I was certain neither of us would be dancing. I didn’t have money, so I walked, which was likely the worst idea. I wondered what I would do if I lost everything.

When I finally reached the emergency room, I asked about Josh and the driver, but they would not give me any information. Seeing me limping around, they said they wanted to look at me and brought a wheelchair, which I immediately fell into. They pushed me back into a room and started an IV with pain medication.

Then, I was taken through a barrage of tests: X-ray, MRI, and such. The pain medication didn’t kill the pain, but my mind was able to leave my body in a very drastic way.

As my mind began to separate from myself, I started to rewrite my entire life. I had such loving parents who doted on me, and I shone. There was no living in constant fear or feeling worthless and alone. I had friends, and I was social. At ballet, I didn’t creep to the back, trying to avoid the inevitable painful comments, but I was in the front, laughing with the other dancers and making plans for what we would do later that night and over the weekend. I was popular and loved. I would later join the NYC ballet, enjoy the adventure of a significant change, and experience immense success.

After that, I reconnected with Kalvis when I ran into him during his business trip. We had aged a little, but there was that magic, and the worst things in life didn’t haunt it. My name would not be associated with guns, violence, pain, and differences. But most importantly, I was not chained to what I had become.

Kal asked me if I wanted to grab dinner; he had heard a catacomb-style French restaurant was supposed to be one of the best dining experiences. He said it has a two-year waitlist, but his buddy’s dad owned it, so he got in and was going to go alone, but would love to have the company. I hadn’t a boyfriend, and I never got married, even into my thirties, not out of fear in this life but out of drive; I didn’t want to be tied down. I immediately accepted.

After I accepted the invitation, I bid him farewell and rushed home to get ready. When I got home, I called Josh, who now works in high fashion, to see if he had any samples he could lend me. His dresses run from a couple to several thousand dollars, and he’s been likened to an up-and-coming Versace. He replied that he had something that would be perfect. I said I’d see him after work, but he said, “No,” that I'd see him in twenty minutes. He had never known me to date much, much less ask for a very exceptional dress, so he said he couldn’t stay at work. I laughed. The newer version of Josh was not nearly a likeness to Peter Pan, which was a good thing for him, but he still had plenty of magical moments, and I immensely enjoyed them. Gone were the days of regularly drinking concoctions that only an insane person without taste buds could enjoy. Josh had a new boyfriend, Johnny, whom he described as kind and well-endowed; he always went into way too much detail about their very steamy sex life. I would update him on my dance studio, which has become increasingly successful. I have classes from many dance genres, and we have proven results of helping you get in shape quickly and overcome depression. I have hired managers and instructors and teach part-time. In my spare time, I chase my myriad of hobbies or explore the city I fell in love with.

Once Josh arrived, he asked me about the magic man. Since the violence never occurred, I could say that I met this boy in middle school, but I was timid. I have always admired Kal’s true goodness; he’s helpful and kind. He was always very cute when he was younger, but man, did he turn handsome in high school; if I had been bolder, I would have approached him. I suppose that was my secret wish, not for anyone to come along and love me, but for *him,* too. I didn’t fully believe in wishes, but every time it was 11:11, I would make that wish while thinking about his unearthly eyes and loving temperament. It was pretty spectacular and unbelievable that so many years later, he appeared; perhaps true wishes do come true. Josh said, “It’s got to be like divine intervention. You know dreams can come true?”

I looked at my wonder boy and said, “I’m starting to realize that.”

Then he squeezed my hand and said, “Good, because you’re going to see that all of it will happen; you can accept that if you’d like.”

The words played more like a riddle, which was odd. But I thought about it and chose not to overthink it. Instead, I thought, “I suppose he is right*,*” and said, “I hope it does happen.”

My words were beautiful songs regarding him, composed of enchantment and clarity. And I knew everything after the initial fantasy wore off would be great because now we are a team. Life will ebb and flow, consisting of both good and bad, but it will all be manageable now. Love changes things; it transforms our hearts and ties us together.

Josh interrupted my daydreams when he said, “Hello… Lady… You're certainly going slow for someone who needs to get somewhere in New York. Dream about your knight on the subway, girl.”

I looked at the clock and said, “Oh shit!”

I was about to walk out of this daydream into my life, the absolute dream. So we finished up, and I felt so incredibly sexy. Josh created this ballet-inspired skirt, but instead of tulle, it was made of a thick material resembling ribbon candy. It was very unique. The top was a bustier, which lifted and displayed my chest. My long hair was fashioned in loose curls. My makeup was sultry, with smoky eyes and intricate details. I hugged Josh and then said, “Thank you!”

He held me in his embrace. “It’s no problem. Just remember what I said earlier.”

I had already forgotten, so I nodded, and he hugged me. I walked out the door, and he said he loved me. I said it back, closed the door, and hurried to the restaurant. I got there before Kal, so I sat at the very fancy reserved table for two under Mr. Jules; what a lovely last name. Mary Jules sounded poetic and calm.

When Kal walked through the door, I saw it all; I saw a better, happier, and less lonely existence. I imagine this was similar to Nessie’s dramatic entrance on that first date with Zachy when he got everything he wished and hoped for. Hope drifted toward me, slowly, but in a way that didn’t feel like deprivation but more like anticipation.

When he reached the table, he said, “Hello… Wow… You look stunning, Mary!”

He immediately hugged me, and we stayed in that embrace for a while. It felt like he also needed and was connected to me more profoundly than an acquaintance.

Then he pulled away and kissed me, which was unexpected; it felt like warmth and light. I felt loved, and I hadn’t felt that before; love is powerful. Our moment, however, was interrupted by a fancily dressed server who took our drink order.

Then we looked around; the lighting and the catacombs were truly an immersion into something dark but lovely. I could see the reason for the wait; it was special.

We then sat down and caught up about everything. He remained a devout Christian and achieved incredible success in the tech industry. His family was doing well. I then told him all about my life.

But before our dinner had arrived, the whole place shook, and the structure became crystal, exposing the world around it, now devoid of walls. The giant lifted the considerable crystal ball we were contained in and gazed at us intently until he started to spin us lightly to his amusement. It wasn’t scary or fast, but more an exercise in power; he *could* spin us and was in control; it wasn’t sinister, but more fascinating. He was not our master but our creator.

After some time on the mythical merry-go-round, it became pitch black. I grabbed Kal and pulled him in.

Then, all at once, I remembered reality, the truth. It’s like having a bad event happen and going to sleep, only to wake up and forget it for a while, until it all comes rushing back. I remembered who I was: I was not perfect or successful, and was terribly afraid and lonely. The globe seemed inescapable, as we were encapsulated, yet we were together, so it didn’t feel like a prison but a cocoon.

While holding onto him, some light appeared, and a dark figure came into the crystal ball with us. He dropped his black trench coat to expose guns, and then he shot at us. We were both covered in blood. I woke up screaming.

**Part Four: Entendre**

Whatever they gave me was intense. I didn’t realize I had fallen asleep and that my daydream had become an actual dream, which I didn’t think was a dream. I’ve never had a dream feel so real and cohesive; usually, they are pieced together in a highly odd and disjointed way. The realization was devastating to me; I had everything for a moment. But then I told myself that I may be unable to change the past or who I am now, but I could still make my dream come true.

Then Zachy entered the room and said, “Oh my gosh, Mary. I’m glad you’re ok.”

I said, “I’m not dead, but I don’t know that I am okay. Have you seen Josh?”

Zachy came and sat by me, holding my hand. It was the fatherly love I needed so badly, and I was so emotionally overcome that I started crying. Through tears, I said, “Zachy, I’m lost, and that is a generous description. I want to be like everyone else,” and as I let it all out, I felt like I let it go.

Then my tears stopped, and Zachy looked at me and said, “You know you can have happiness and fulfill your dreams?”

It was precisely what Dream Josh said; Zach continued, “I mean… The past is something that no one can change, nor can we completely change its effects on us. But I have found that you can take one step at a time, and then one day, you’ll be at a different place, and the influence the past has over you can transform into something different. And there’s nothing to be lost by taking those steps.”

I had heard this sentiment before, but I never found it helpful until now. I think I had to go through it all. I needed to feel the anger, sadness, and loneliness, but I needed someone to believe in and support me during that process. I needed it all not to be reduced to nothing. It was horrible. It was real. Making it anything else prevented me from healing. I was not able to heal because it was too much for any one person, and I never had any help. Now, I finally had a friend in Josh, a mentor in Zachy, and I was in love with Kal. I was starting to come out the other side.

But my more positive visions for the future were broken by screams. The nurse came in and told us something was happening, and they were locking the patients in their rooms. It seemed absolutely unbelievable that so much intensity seemed to follow me.

Zachy said, “Don’t focus on that,” which made me become a snake being charmed into a trance. I should have been terrified, and my PTSD should have kicked in, but that wasn’t the case. Zachy said, “I want to finish my story because there are some things you need to know. So, as I told you, I was heading to the hospital to hear what Dr. Myers had to say about my wife and this trial.

“When I got to the hospital, I passed people, and I felt like a ghost. The world and the hospital were busy, but everything was spinning and moving around me. Dr. Myers was in the room when I got to the office. I didn’t know what he would say, but I knew that whatever it was, it would be life-altering. Doctor Myers greeted me and said, ‘Zachy. It’s good to see you, but I wish it had been under much better circumstances. I never let you know precisely what you meant to me. My differences have made me a very successful doctor, but a very misunderstood person. Many times, I felt like a prisoner to my mind. So, I avoided social interactions altogether, knowing what they bring. But then, when you came into my life, I gained a small piece of what I had always hoped for. I’m not saying that we hung out constantly because of my unbelievable academic load, but I spent more time with you than anyone else, other than Valori. I felt protected by you. I knew that people respected you and your values and opinions, so they almost feared that if they did something to me, they would, by proxy, be doing it to you. As a result, I became less afraid to enter those social settings, and before I knew it, I almost began to look forward to them. I know we haven’t been in contact much because we’re busy and have families now, but that special spot I have for you in my heart will never go away or be forgotten. What I’m going to do for you is offer my help. I know you’ve followed my career through our sporadic communications over the years, but there’s much more that you don’t know, as not many people do, since much of it's classified.

‘As you know, I have several degrees, mainly in technology, engineering, and medicine. In the years since college, I have been working on several innovations that will drastically change the medical field. Most of my innovations revolve around using artificial intelligence to diagnose and treat more accurately. Even the most skilled doctor makes errors, and your hands and eyes are only so accurate, but computers and artificial intelligence… well, they are perfect.

‘Some years ago, my work gained the attention of a four-star general who approached me with an offer. What he shared with me broke my heart; he said that his daughter, only eleven years old, had been hit by a drunk driver while playing outside and is now incapacitated. He handed me her medical file, and I was shocked that he would even approach me because, quite honestly, there was nothing that I could do. She was a vegetable. He was using all of his money, keeping her on life support. I can’t even imagine what he was going through, and I likely would’ve paid everything to keep my children alive, even if that word wasn’t entirely accurate. It’s so hard to let go. He could not let go.

‘Since the accident, the general threw himself into his work and became affiliated with the more secret parts of the government. The general explained that he had done many things for our country that were hard for him and that he felt conflicted about, but he sought out those things because he knew that if he did, then one day, he could call in a favor. That’s precisely what he was doing; he had secured the funding and resources for some alternative to his daughter’s fate. Seeing this man, who was as hard as they come, break down in tears had an overpowering effect on me.

‘But as I said, Zachy, I’m not a warlock or a deity, so I can only work within the confines of what is possible, regardless of how much I wanted to ease his suffering. I was about to console and explain that to him when the general said, ‘I know that you’re thinking that I’m asking for something that is not possible, but it’s only not possible because it hasn’t been done yet. I have researched, scouted, and secretly observed you for some time now and believe in you. Just think, every huge advance was once believed to be impossible. At one time, no one ever thought we would be able to explore space the way we have. At one time, no one thought anything like smartphones could exist. You can make this possible, and I will help you with resources and money. I have already assembled a team of the most brilliant minds I have hand-selected. What do you have to lose by taking me up on my offer? Even if you don’t believe in yourself the way I believe in you, something great must come of all that research in time, correct?’

‘I had considered this, Zachy, and this was one of those very few offers in life that is just too good to pass up, but I also knew that there are impossible things in life. I didn’t want to give this man false hope because I wouldn’t want anybody to give it to me. So, I respectfully declined the offer. Upon hearing my refusal, the general said, ‘Please do this… I don’t expect anything, but I must say I tried everything… Please… Please… Please.’ It was a perfect combination of things that made me feel inclined to accept. But what sold me was that he knew this could lead to nothing, so he was completely informed.

‘So… Zachy, I worked on his request for the next seven years. Initially, I experienced numerous failures. I’m accustomed to success or success following moderate failure, but this was a total failure that began to devastate me. That devastation had a profound impact on my personal life.

‘Then things changed one night while working in my den. I got so frustrated that I started sobbing loudly for a very long time; I have never had an emotional overload like that. Hearing my audible sorrow, Valori came in and consoled me. I then explained to her a fair deal of the situation, even though much of it was top-secret. I expressed extreme frustration that I was wasting all my time trying to raise Lazarus from the dead; I was no genie, so nothing was coming from this. I felt that the country’s money could be spent on much more practical areas of the field. In many ways, I started to feel like Rasputin.

‘That is when Valori gave me the best advice, which altered everything; she said, ‘What he wants is to be with his daughter and engage with her, correct? So maybe instead of raising her from the dead, you could make a way for them to be together.’ It’s wild that I had never really thought of this. I had one goal in mind, and that was trying to find a way to restore her to the girl that she was before the accident. Now, I wondered if there could be another way for them to be together. And so I changed course.

‘And a few years later, that general would prove correct when we had achieved something impossible. What I invented is quite complicated, but I can explain it: her brain was no longer functioning, and as a result, she lay comatose, so I came up with something similar to an electrode that would be implanted in her brain to treat those pathways and reignite the synapses. I was able to find a way, with my invention and the help of stem cells, to start reawakening and rebuilding those pathways.

‘We didn’t see any progress for a long time, but with patience and time, we suddenly started to see some progress. It was slow progress, but those brain waves became more active. It was like a baby’s brain at this time as far as functioning and memory, but it was no longer dead. Instead of bringing the dead back to life, we brought life back into somebody.

‘As the girl’s brain developed, we could monitor her dreams as they translated into a computer program; we saw it play out like a movie. Still, her dreams were wild, and there was nothing productive about them previously, as there is nothing gained by dreaming. That is when my talented team came up with the idea of virtual living. So, I created a beautiful fantasy world that was tailored to her.

‘When her mind started developing, and she became more interactive in this world, I began to teach her about herself. I would play home movies and show photographs of her life before, just like downloading images and videos onto a computer. But it was like being shown your life instead of remembering it, which was a detached experience.

‘Then, eventually, I advanced the computer technology to interact with her. I was able to connect myself to my invention and help develop her. I got to know her, and I became her teacher. With time, we matured her physically so that it would match the teenager and then the young adult she was, instead of being stuck as a little girl. Watching her progress and seeing how she became a lovely woman was amazing. It was hard not to get attached.

‘I came to find later in the experiment, after I spent sufficient time in this alternate world, that there were issues that I hadn’t even considered; maybe that was because there were so many other issues to consider. One of the main issues was regarding me; at first, I never thought it would be easy to lose touch with reality, as reality had plenty of rewards and substance, and I never had the type of reality that was truly worthy of running from. However, the more time I spent in this beautiful place with this lovely woman, the more the contrast became apparent. Just as in reality, there are compromises, sacrifices, discord, work, hurt, and many other challenging aspects that we must overcome and endure. And what is it that makes reality actual reality? Is it our belief that it is real that gives it that title? What makes reality so substantial and relevant that it would be worth giving up such a beautiful lie? As I spent more time in this world, my attachment only grew stronger. In many ways, I created her, and I was the most important to her; she needed me. I have never been placed in higher regard than that.

‘My wife was strong, independent, and perfect in many ways, but never really needed me; I suppose that is what you’re supposed to want, right? Still, the feeling that I was needed changed my perception. More than any superficial or egotistical qualities, it was more about connection; this world is full of distractions and options, but she and I didn’t have that. I became her one connection to reality as she learned the difference between the two and came to understand her situation.

‘With time, the things that used to matter to me no longer held as much of a position. I would come home after a day at work, mostly spent with Larissa, and notice my wife concentrating on whatever incredible project she was working on. We would nod to each other and spend a bit of time apart. Later, we would reunite for dinner, where the kids would join us briefly before running off to their own devices. Then, she and I would watch a little TV and retire to our bedroom, where we would read for a bit before going to sleep. I still loved our closeness and admired her as a woman, but she was also a mature and pragmatic individual, which meant there was a notable absence of lightheartedness. Our sex life had always been rigid, which meant the sensuality could never really blossom entirely. As I withdrew, my mind kept warning itself that you’ll never find a woman as good as your wife.

‘At that point, my time at home felt like bidding time until I got to go to work. And I suppose that I thought maybe this is as far as it will go; I’ll just be a bit detached from real life, which many people are. Then, when the lines began to blur further, I figured I just had a functioning obsession and addiction, which isn’t healthy or normal, but I told myself it would not go any further than that, and it would likely dissipate with time. But the longer it went on, the more deluded I got. Being in the thick of it, I wasn’t even really able to see that evolution. Still, looking back, I can see how it progressed from not being a problem to a minor one, and then became much more prominent until it became an incredible problem. And just like the siren song is so sweet until you end up dead on the rocks, it was never destined to end well.

‘Now, I’m planning a move and need somebody to take over; I believe you could be that man. LIVAD is the program I invented, and I have a team, but I have kept many aspects secret to maintain control. If you accept my offer, you will accept my place.’

Zachy paused briefly and then continued, “Mary, as you can imagine, I could barely believe what I was hearing, but I had to consider who it came from; this is a man similar to great men like Newton, Galileo, and Einstein. But I didn’t know what to say because it’s quite a murky subject, right? Especially since my belief in God was cement to his construct. If I kept Nellie alive, I could be preventing her from crossing over into heaven.

“Yet, I didn’t have time to consider, seeing as she would need to get it hooked up as soon as possible. So I pushed my reservations out the window, shook his hand, and said, ‘You have a deal.’

“Myers took my hand and said, ‘I’m so glad. I can’t think of anybody more deserving and able to fill my shoes than you, my friend.’

“He then pulled me in, and we hugged for a moment. My compassion for this man led to his compassion for my wife, and it was one of the greatest lessons in life about getting what we give. He soon let the embrace go and said, ‘All right, well, I better get to work here. It’s going to be a 50-hour shift. Go home and rest because we will have a journey ahead of us.’

“Then he walked out the door, and I drove home. It was all so much, so fast, that I didn’t even know where to start with processing all of this. I would get to see my wife again, but never in this actual life, and things would be much different. However, I knew that I’d rather live an illusion with her than reality with anyone else. And then all of my twisted thoughts unraveled, and I got excited to see her again soon; I had missed her so much.

“When I got home, I was so exhausted that I appreciated the empty house. I texted my friends and told them I had some good news and that we should all meet for dinner, but I wanted to rest a bit.

“Then I closed my eyes and drifted almost instantly to sleep, and there Nessie was. She and I were inside that orb, but with all the different colors changing and dancing around us. We held each other, and she looked into my eyes and kissed me. I woke up feeling like that must’ve been a sign that I was doing the right thing.

“After waking up, I got ready and met Rick and Tiffany for dinner; the kids stayed with Tiffany’s mother. I explained to them that we had been offered a treatment that looked promising, but I couldn’t say much more at this time. They agreed to help with the children, as I told them I would have to travel to Brussels for this new and innovative treatment. I would never be allowed to explain the extent of the treatment, as our involvement in the program was top-secret. However, my considerable change in demeanor was enough to relax them both. And then the three of us ate, the best of friends going through the worst of storms together, and I realized then that the only way you can make it out of a storm is together.

“While rebuilding Nessie’s pathways, he trained me with Larissa, and what I learned under Myers was quite an education. The technology was incredible. I couldn’t even believe what I was experiencing and seeing. It wasn’t like a virtual reality video game, as I had expected, because it was identical to life.

“As I worked with Myers, I thought that it was, in some ways, egregious that a doctor would cross that line, but honestly, maybe it’s not hard to cross lines when you’ve already crossed so many. I often wanted to ask him more about it and make sure he was making good decisions, but I was too scared of my position. However, witnessing the process in my life made me better understand it; watching my wife’s tests and scans progress was an experience in hope and progress, and an exercise in faith. It was so much more intimate than even a husband and wife's relationship. Also, going into Larissa’s world, I got to see them together, and even though they tried to keep it as professional as possible for my benefit, there was something extraordinary there. You could tell she loved him the way I love my wife; that is to say, it was never a part but everything. And he provided her with companionship, comfort, and care, and loved her intensely. And the more exposure I had, the more I realized that things are often much more complicated than the tiny boxes we like to put everything in.

“By the time my wife was starting to gain the mind of a child, I could fully appreciate the beauty within their love. My original feelings that it was a mistake to give up the relationship with his wife also changed; I realized that love can be ideal for a time, and a person may be your soulmate during that time, but when life changes, so do you both, so wouldn’t it be logical that your soulmate could change as well?

“Unfortunately, I found the same pitfalls that Myers experienced to be also true for myself. For instance, my children stayed with Rick and Tiffany during my training in Belgium, but I would come home for two weeks around the Christmas holiday and then two weeks in the summer, and that was it. I explained that we were in a secret trial that would require us both to be overseas for the foreseeable future, and she wouldn’t be able to see anyone else during this time. My friends didn’t hesitate to help me because they knew I would have done the same for them. I truly missed them all that first year, and I could tell they all missed us terribly.

“After a year away, I thought I should take a sabbatical and go home for a while. It became incredibly conflicting to know that I had real friends and children, and I was neglecting them all for one person who was not even awake. But just before I asked for that, my wife progressed to understanding and being teachable.

“Then, I took on her mentor role, and I couldn’t have anybody oversee that but myself because I needed to know it was done right. Once we got started, the stimulation and invention allowed her to grasp things so quickly that we went through a great deal in good time. I saw what most people never will: the experiment of nature versus nurture. Of course, our experiences, environment, and people shape us, but how much they do is unknown. I wondered what changes the general saw in his daughter. That is when I realized I had never seen the general, but I didn’t pry because of my place in this.

“About three years into the project, I realized I hadn’t seen my friends and family in a year and a half. I kept telling myself I meant to get around to it, but I wanted to reach this benchmark; however, when that benchmark was reached, I could never allow myself to not be there for the next one. I never wanted to leave her. I never wanted to miss a single moment in her development. So, I tried to compensate for this by sending them a substantial amount of money and assistance, as they continued to raise our children.

“Unfortunately, when Nessie’s personality was more or less formally formed, I realized that the Nessie I knew would never be returning; I realized that I had to mourn my wife. It was hard because, more than how she looked, I fell in love with who she was, and she wasn’t any longer. There were particular idiosyncrasies and aspects of her personality to which I felt a deep attachment. But even with the person on the inside not matching the person I had fallen in love with, there was so much to love, and before I realized it, I fell in love with her. I felt conflicted for a while, but I gained much peace when I let go of everything she wasn’t and focused on what she was.

“When we were entirely in love, I knew I would have to explain the situation to her: she isn’t alive in the traditional sense, but instead, she is suspended in some dream-like state where I was keeping her, and I would need to tell her about her previous life. But before I could, Raymond Myers informed me that Larissa’s connection was having issues that Nessie didn’t have, because Nessie was in the lab and not rerouted. To stay connected, Myers would be giving up his reality for a permanent alternate one sooner than expected. He said that my training and everything led to the point where I would now maintain control over the experiment’s three patients, including him. I asked him what he would tell his family, and he said that he would tell them he was involved in a top-secret experiment in Africa that would take years to complete. Sadly, they were not used to seeing him often so that it wouldn’t be much of an adjustment. So, I told him I would take good care of everyone and visit them.

**Part Five: Glisser**

As Zachy continued his story, the lights frequently went out for extended periods, but he kept going, saying, “For Myers’s last day in reality, we had a lovely meal and reminisced about his life; there were so many good times and funny stories. I thought he might get cold feet and reconsider, but he wasn’t overly attached to the past, which is evident in his happiness in moving forward and leaving it behind.

“After some time, Raymond Myers said, ‘Zachy, I must tell you my dark secret, and I anticipate knowing the lengths you would go to for your love that you would keep it for me, even if it’s not necessarily in your character.

‘About four years ago, when I was secure enough that the technology was safe, I allowed the general to join Larissa in her dream world. I took time to prepare both of them because this person had been told of memories in her life but didn’t live them, so her family would be strangers to her, more like characters in movies she watched. Also, she was no longer a little girl and did not resemble her, as we had allowed her to grow. Additionally, I worried that his introduction would separate the dream world I had created from reality, making it evident that it was all an illusion, and she would become depressed. I lost a lot of sleep in anticipation of the meeting.

‘That first meeting went as well as it could. It contained the expected awkwardness, as they were strangers trying to become familiar and more comfortable with each other.

‘Before meeting her in the virtual land, the general deferred to me, seeing as I was her doctor and knew what was best for her; however, afterward, the general became forceful with his number of interactions and overall control over his daughter’s life; he also wanted her back the way she was. I hoped their biological connection, building a relationship, and creating new memories would bring them closer together, and her differences would matter less.

‘Unfortunately, the more time passed, the further apart they became, without any real improvement. This devastated the general, and it was disheartening to see him like that, because I remembered that this was a hardened military general who had shown up at my office in tears, his heart on his sleeve, willing to pay any price and do anything to have her return. It was the most beautiful love story, but it seemed doomed to end tragically.

‘It didn’t take long for the general to pressure me to make her as before. I didn’t want to do what he was demanding because you can’t force someone to be who you want them to be; it only feels like a disappointment and fractures the relationship. Yet, when I would rebuff or redirect him, he would remind me that this was his project and that he had secured everything. Still, I did my best to follow his orders while minimizing the impact on Larissa; at this point, I had developed a deep affection for her and had fallen in love, so I was in a precarious situation.

‘Then, Zachy, when my gentle leading tactics did not produce the expected results, the general took it personally, and he made our team’s lives unbearable. I tried to give him a wide berth because I could see his desperation in the hurt, and I knew the motivation wasn’t anything nefarious, but he was desperately trying to hold on. But no matter the reason, he displaced his anger on us, and the abuse and long hours were brutal. Still, I hoped that, like anything we grieve in life, he would eventually come to terms with it.

‘Unfortunately, I had forgotten that this was the same general who moved mountains and stayed stubborn for his little girl’s return. Time did not heal wounds or gain understanding, but increased the general’s rage, especially toward me, as he believed that my relationship with her was causing the connection never to be made with him. He figured somebody was already in that role, so the need for him was not there. I did consider this because it somewhat made sense. Still, upon examining all their interactions, I genuinely believe that if I weren’t involved, it wouldn’t have helped because they were so disconnected. It’s hard not to let our expectations and hopes get in the way of reality.

‘When the general realized there wasn’t any improvement, he decided to remove me from the equation. He felt I was the only obstacle between him and getting what he wanted. I tried to reason with him, explaining that I was never the issue, as I continued to help build that connection and believed that love could conquer all.

But he couldn’t accept that, so he told me I needed to take a sabbatical, which was the last thing I wanted because Larissa was my blood in my veins. I grew so accustomed to that companionship and connection that cutting it off cold turkey made me feel like I wanted to die. It was hard not to hate the general because I felt, in ways, I had made this possible in the first place, only to be treated horribly and then ousted. But every time I would villainize him entirely, I tried to remember that he did love her and that whatever madness was going on in his head was caused by that extreme love and loss. I wanted to stay, but what could I do?

‘Then, one day, without notice, I was escorted out of the building without even being able to say goodbye. Even if I hadn’t loved her, I had worked with her for years, so not saying goodbye was crushing, and there was no closure. I cried very audibly for the whole drive home until I crawled up into my bed and continued to cry.

‘When Valori noticed how sad I was, she was pretty frightened because this was the first time she’d ever seen me cry in all these years. She asked me what was wrong, but I could hardly get the words out and didn’t know what to say, so I told her what happened with omissions. Valori seemed to understand this, as we are both perfectionists, and failure is something we obsess about.

‘After mulling it over, she said all of the things that I expected she would like, ‘That wasn’t right,’ ‘I’ll be able to find employment immediately,’ ‘Maybe I should take an extended break after working so hard,’ and ‘I’m the most intelligent most capable person she knew.’

‘Valori and I got together at 19 years old and were now middle-aged; it was a natural progression that we changed in so many years; yet, while we may not have passion, we were left with an unbreakable friendship that always seemed worth sticking with. It's harder to go when something is comfortable and not contentious.

‘After comforting me for some time, she realized this was one of the times when leaving the person alone was more what they wanted than the support. She told me to let her know if she needed anything and that everything would be fine. She then continued with her routine, which never changed and was heavily based on her work, and I remained in the depths of despair.

‘With time, I hoped I would feel better, but my heart was so attached to Larissa that I couldn’t get myself out of the sadness.

My identity had been so wrapped up in her that when I lost her, essentially, I lost my identity. I didn’t know what to do, so I decided to go on an extended European trip alone. I hoped the pain would ease, aided by beauty and excitement, and that I could start to reestablish my identity without her.

I visited ten different countries and saw all the things I grew up knowing were famous and exceptional, while wanting to share something with Larissa or see how she enjoyed whatever it was. So, it didn’t lessen my love for her but only confirmed it. I always wondered what she was doing and if my absence affected her situation. I worried the general didn’t tell her the true story, so she may feel I abandoned her.

‘I also thought about the general and still hoped that as a brilliant man, he would eventually realize that some things you have to let go of; you have to know when to hold them and when to fold them because if you don’t, your life will be exceptionally more challenging and painful. Sometimes, you must let someone go, even realizing they may not return because holding them with confinement and control are the great adversaries of love, so you will never receive the love returned anyhow.

‘Once I got back from Europe, I was no more found than I had started, but I began to be able to be more numb, which I hoped would make me more functional. I knew I would never find love like that again because it’s instinctual, deep within your heart. My life lost its color, but I had to return to it, so I did my best to settle into my previous routine before her. I began working independently on inventions, and I felt that I could earn a substantial income while contributing to the advancement of medical technology.

‘Then we sent our second son off to college to join our oldest, and our youngest begged us to send her to the boarding school that her best friend attended, so we ended up being empty-nesters much more quickly than we had anticipated.

‘When the children were gone, Valori told me she wanted to divorce, which shocked me. Ironically enough, she met a beautiful woman named Karen at work; they had been working on several projects together and fell in love. She said she never acted on the feelings, but could tell they were mutual. Now that the children were out of the home and I was more stable and working again, she wanted to explore those feelings. She flinched, even though I’ve never been a volatile person.

‘When she was finished, I immediately hugged her. She could never know that my situation was similar, except mine didn’t have a happy ending, so I had great compassion for her. I let go of the embrace and said, ‘Valori, I remember the first time I met you in chess club; you always wore your hair in these tightly wound curls with a ribbon tying everything up, and you had a ribbon to match each of your variety of pencil skirts; I remember thinking how put together you looked. You were my first crush and really my first everything. I never had any chance to second-guess myself or wonder where you stood. I always felt like I married my best friend. ‘I know we both are so dramatically different from who we used to be, and that’s how it should be: you grow, learn, and change. I can say without a doubt that I don’t regret the years we spent together because they were so happy and supportive, and we have beautiful children. I love you and want you to find happiness, even if it isn’t with me; you deserve that, so know that I am happy that you’re happy,’ and I meant every word; I just wanted her to be happy, even if I didn’t think I’d ever find that for myself.

‘After Valori was completely moved out, I missed her much more than I thought I would. It wasn’t necessarily that I was still in love with her or that I felt I had made a mistake, but when you spend that much time with somebody, and they’re your only real human contact, their absence creates a void. I’ve never been a super social person, so I didn’t even know where I could meet people to interact with, so I fell deeper into a depression. I would get up, work on my projects, come home, watch TV, eat, read, sleep, and repeat it all. I still thought of Larissa constantly; I missed her in a way that time wouldn’t lessen, and I didn’t believe anything would.

‘Then, a little after my divorce was finalized, my ex-wife married Karen in a beautiful ceremony. During this time, I realized that happiness is possible for others, but it seemed out of reach for me. I felt suicidal; the emotional pain that I was in was so intense that I couldn’t bear it. I planned everything out and bought my first gun, a revolver, and was making all the arrangements when I received a telephone call from my old cohort, Alejandro. He said that Larissa had become very depressed in my absence, and she realized that the general’s excuses didn’t make sense. She didn’t believe I would leave her, especially without saying goodbye.

‘When the general would not give her the truth and kept demanding, she started finding ways to hide. She would create alternate worlds, so when the general would come to visit, he’d have to go through all these channels and tunnels to be able to find her. Alejandro said it was hard to watch because the general was hurting her by removing the things that made her happy; it became apparent that love had morphed into possessiveness and abuse. The Larissa my team grew to know and love was bold, charismatic, intelligent, creative, clever, and even very happy, given the unusual circumstances. However, once I left, she became withdrawn, sad, and unmotivated; she felt like a disappointment. We had been working with her for many years, so while we all knew it was not professional or wise to get emotionally attached, it was nearly impossible not to.

‘He said that he gave it much time to improve before making this call because he was pretty afraid to do so, but as time progressed, she just kept getting worse and worse. So he thought he could sneak me in and at least tell her I didn’t intentionally abandon her, which would make her feel better. He also figured it would uplift her spirits so much that it would benefit everybody, including the general.

‘Naturally, I agreed immediately. I honestly never thought this was even a possibility, hence the suicide plan. The timing was too much for me not to believe it was divine intervention. We then arranged for the meeting to take place outside of regular business hours. It was quite something to see somebody risk so much for somebody else. That whole night, I could not sleep. It was almost so wonderful that I wondered if maybe I did kill myself, and I was about to enter heaven; she was my heaven.

‘When I met him later, he plugged me in, and I entered her world. The place was so different than when I left it. Before I left, Larissa started to have more control over her surroundings and life, so she was less dependent on me to create the programs, and her world was lovely. Now the floor was a pile of ash, as if she had created something, then set it on fire, never rebuilding it again, and repeated this process over and over. The entire place was so dark that it was difficult to see, and it was mainly just tunnels, like a maze in a horror movie. I tried calling her name, but she never responded, so I wandered through those dark tunnels. I would hear noises, as if she were near me, but it felt like she was hiding.

‘Then I heard the sound of footsteps, which were much easier to hear, considering there wasn’t anything going on visually, so I ran towards those. While running, the noise increased as her beating heart was amplified; it became so loud that it shook the ground. I then began to scream for her, and the quaking ceased. I immediately felt her presence, and she slowly walked towards me from the other side of the tunnel.

‘When she saw I was the visitor, she seemed surprised and greeted me with coldness. I didn’t allow those feelings to linger as I moved towards her, swung my arms around her, and held her to my chest. I could feel the wetness of her tears, and her grip on me was extremely tight. We stayed in that embrace for some time, and it was honestly the best feeling I had ever felt in my entire life. She was the defibrillator to my heart; she was everything, and I never expected to see her again.

‘Initially, I considered lying to her because I didn’t want to turn her against her father; he loved her. But then I reconsidered as I noticed he was destroying her, and I didn’t want her to think I had abandoned her for no good reason. So I realized I couldn’t be dishonest with her about anything anymore… not my reason for leaving, my feelings, or anything else.

‘It wasn’t long before she changed the scenery to a beautiful park with blue skies in perfect weather, and we came to lie on the grass beside one another. I meant for this last meeting to give her closure; perhaps she could find peace if she didn’t wonder why I left her. But having her in my arms, I realized I didn’t think I could let her go again. Lying there, she asked me why I would leave her, and I told her the truth in a way that wasn’t black and white because it wasn’t. She knew a lot about the situation, but never in the way I'm telling it to her now.

‘I shared what I learned about the general through other people in the many years working with him. The general lost his mother very early in his life due to breast cancer, and that loss was so painful and changed his life drastically. His father was an officer in the military and often abusive, which got much worse without his attentive mother to protect him. The general joined the army at 17 years old and continued trying to impress his father, but this was impossible. His father did not maintain the relationship and then died of alcoholism.

‘I explained to Larissa that her father was a man who escaped his pain through determination in his career. He rose through the ranks quickly and wielded considerable power as a result. His unwavering personality and uncompromising grit made him both admired and disliked. Even with all his success, it was apparent that he was missing something; yet, he would never allow anyone in, fearing he would lose them. That is, until he met her mother, Hera, at a military ball she attended with her father, a high-ranking officer above his own.

‘At that ball, her father, a colonel at the time, was walking by their table to get a dessert when Major General Ross called him to their table. After her father introduced himself, he went to walk away, but Major General Ross summoned him to sit down. The then-colonel wasn’t social by nature and wanted to leave, but it wasn't as if he could do that, so he sat down with them.

‘Then, they all started talking. Major General Ross’s daughter, Hera, was at the table. She had strawberry blonde hair with stark blue eyes, just like Larissa's, and was just 19 years old, much younger than Larissa’s father. Still, she was well-cultured, having lived in many different countries and received an excellent education. She explained that she would attend college in Pennsylvania in the fall but would still visit Fort Drum. Larissa’s father described his plans to move up the ranks and, hopefully, be stationed in Europe as much as possible.

‘Eventually, Major General Ross got up but insisted that the colonel watch his seat. That is when Larissa’s father knew that he was being set up. Military bases are like tiny towns, and everyone knows everything about everyone else. Larissa’s father had a great reputation as a driven soldier who went ‘Green to Gold’ at the age of 21, which is a remarkable achievement. After leaving West Point, Larissa’s father continued to push hard, pursuing his dreams of becoming a four-star general, which he ultimately achieved later in life. He never married, had no children, was not a party boy, was making great money, had a great career, so it was easy to understand why Hera’s father would want him as a son-in-law but even easier to understand if you knew the type of men Hera usually went for; she liked the ‘bad boys.’ It was likely due to her age and will to rebel against a rigorous and demanding father.

‘More triggering than anything was Major General Ross’s fear that she was turning out like her mother, Emilia, who abandoned the family for a much younger man she met while working at the commissary in Philippians. Major General Ross tried to control his wife, not realizing that the control was what she was trying to escape. The major general saw a stupid woman who was willing to throw away a life of wealth, status, and family for a ‘grocery bagger.’ Emilia, however, saw an escape from a man who was as militant at home as he was at work, who could be extremely cold to her, and was often away from the family.

‘When Emilia met this other man, he gave her so much attention and affection and was compromising, which she found incredibly valuable. Emilia felt her soul was being crushed, and staying wouldn’t improve the family anymore, so Emilia left and never turned back. Even after she left, Major General Ross could not see how his actions had caused the deterioration of the relationship, and he accepted no fault in the matter.

‘When his control was not getting results with Hera, Major General Ross changed tactics and decided to find a good man to be a suitor and marry her young. For such an intelligent man, Major General Ross did not realize that he was recreating the same conditions that his wife had run from.

‘After speaking for some time, your father and Hera were again joined by Hera’s father, who was ecstatic to see them much closer together and deep in conversation.

‘Once Major General Ross decided your father was a perfect man, maybe because they were so similar, he became forceful with both parties in his match-making endeavors, and he had to be entertained by your father due to his rank, and he held the money and resources his daughter needed.

‘Still, pacifying someone doesn’t always result in real progress. Your father was determined to never let anyone in, and he ensured it with his behavior. Hera was too young to want to settle down, much less with someone who had all the qualities she resented in her father. So, he tried to bribe his daughter while explaining to your father that the army looks very much at the spouse, so he would only go so far without one. Still, neither party immediately got on board with everything, as they had ample reasons not to. However, Major General Ross started to strong-arm them both by causing issues with his career and her resources. It didn’t take long for there to be more reasons than not to.

‘Eventually, your father and Hera acquiesced, which is not the stuff of great romances and quite an outdated way of courtship. Still, they dated, and it went well, with the major general encouraging this by making good on his promises; she had many more resources, and his career moved past that barrier. They both enjoyed each other's company enough that this arrangement worked out very well, and it was not long before they got married. The marriage started great as your father had less to worry about since Hera maintained the household, and she didn’t have to work, so she had plenty of free time to invest in herself. They settled into a stable and supportive life, and neither realized how much that enhances your life. Before they knew it, they were genuinely in love.

‘As a wedding gift, Major General Ross purchased them a reasonably large Victorian-style home outright, and she decorated it beautifully inside and out. Fixing up the house took a lot of time and was a significant distraction for her, but once that was done, she became restless, so she started getting more involved in activities for soldiers and their families. She would host a brunch once a month in their backyard, and it always had a packed turnout. Hera’s activities and volunteering on base did not go unnoticed, and before they knew it, the colonel became a brigadier general.

‘After that promotion and the excitement wore off, she became restless again, and she decided to go to community college, as she dreamed of being a reporter. She became a full-time student and part of an affiliated dance team. She was not around as much with school and dance practice, which was great for her but hard on the relationship. Your father, feeling insecure and slighted, responded by becoming more like Major General Ross, and she responded much like her mother did before leaving the family for a younger man; their relationship decaying eerily mirrored that of Hera’s mother and father. Your father was demanding and harsh, and she was immature and selfish; neither of them ever communicated maturely, so nothing got resolved. It was heartbreaking because there were solutions, and the marriage could have been salvaged. Still, neither partner was willing to make concessions or try to solve the problems respectfully, so they allowed it to deteriorate.

‘This warring continued until Hera got sick and discovered she was pregnant with you. At this time, your father no longer cherished her because she no longer fully complied and measured up, and she no longer idolized him because he made her feel horrible and was so controlling. Sadly, the impending birth was not enhanced with baby showers, profound bonding, and excitement for the future, but marred by feeling like a prison sentence and the pain of the overall discord.

‘So, Zachy, I explained to Larissa that she was a good thing when she was born, regardless of the circumstances prior; her parents saw so much of themselves in her, and they both saw the best parts of each other in her. There was not much between the couple, but an extreme love for Larissa was enough.

‘For some time, Larissa’s parents were on their best behavior for their daughter’s sake; during that time, things improved so much that it seemed like the relationship could even improve from one of convenience to actual love. Sadly, they could only keep the issues at bay for so long because they were never resolved and only became worse, only hidden until they were too large. Once the problems began, they escalated, and no amount of love for their daughter or desire for peace was enough to stop them; by the end, the relationship had become very ugly.

‘Then, one day, Hera disappeared, and the general felt genuinely distraught. He reproached himself publicly for trusting someone with a mother who abandoned the family, as Hera’s mother had years before. He thought he would hear from her again, but *no* *one* ever did. The dissolution of his marriage hurt much more than he ever showed, but no matter the heartache, he had his little girl, and he never once regretted any of it.

‘I explained to Larissa that her mother loved her, but she likely felt staying would crush her in a way that Larissa observing and absorbing it would be a type of abuse. If your relationship is toxic, then leaving it is much better than ‘staying in it for the kids.’ I also told her that the general probably made it very hard for Hera to see Larissa once she left, out of spite due to his broken heart. Hera likely didn’t have her father’s support either. I tried to explain that the matters of the heart were highly complex.

‘I also explained that I didn’t believe the general was evil but more desperate and frozen in the past, unable to let go. He may appear as the monster he is; still, underneath, there is a boy who hardly had a mother, had an abusive father, and took one shot at love and lost in a way he never played again, only to have this turn around when his daughter gave him all the love her never had later hit by a car and come back without the incredible bond they have previously shared. I hoped this would allow her not to dehumanize him into a villain and see the complete story, which was as complex as they come.

‘This finally led to the answer to her question about why I left: the general’s desperation led him to remove me from the project entirely, believing this would solve the issue; he didn’t want her to be miserable or to hate me, but he was grasping at straws. I stayed away because I had no choice, but even still, I was hoping that, eventually, he would realize that you can’t bend people to your will or you shouldn’t because of how they will feel about you. Nobody wants to feel manipulated or have unrealistic expectations placed upon them, but that realization never came. There was never a time when his love proved selfless, even though I know selfless love is challenging because it involves doing what's best for the other person over oneself, which is divine. He undeniably loved her, but if what was best for her meant he would have to let go or change, then love had conditions.’

We heard loud banging sounds as Zachy continued his story, and I felt afraid.

**Part Six: Tourner**

Seeing my fear, Zachy, like Kal, redirected me back to him; he said, “So, Mary, Doctor Myers told me, ‘Larissa looked away from me and up at the sky; you could tell she was mulling over everything I had just said. She was inexperienced with complex emotional situations, but was naturally an incredibly caring and profound woman. She grabbed my hand, and we held hands as she continued to gaze up at the sky and process everything.

‘After a moment, she looked at me again and said, ‘Raymond, I believe I am an anchor to my father, preventing him from moving; I think I chained him to the past. I wish there were a way to alleviate him of all that. I don’t question his motivations as evil, but more that they feel that way; I feel suffocated, overly controlled, and depressed. I don’t ever want to be without you. I knew I had a deep affection for you, and I suspected it was love before you left. However, it wasn't until you left that I realized it was love; when you left, it destroyed me.

‘So, Raymond, how can we force my father to let go and allow us to remain together?’ I didn’t have an answer for her, Zachy, and I knew that because I had thought about it often. Her father would not accept defeat or victory outside his defined terms, nor would he give up his pursuit, even as it failed miserably. I also knew he would not be reasonable and understand that my departure only worsened things, so my return could only improve them.

‘So I pulled Larissa close, and I didn’t say anything further. You could tell that my embrace was magic to her because I could feel the heat and love radiating from her. We stayed that way, and it was heaven. I loved her more than I could ever put into words.

‘After some time, she asked me if I had seen the movie ‘The Illusionist’; being part of the computer, she had media on demand, and she said this movie was one of her favorites. I said I had not seen this movie, so she gave me a summary. She said that two friends fell in love during their childhood, except the woman had a grander social standing than the man. She was whisked off to become a woman of high society, and he went on to learn magic.

‘Larissa explained that the two characters separated, but their existence seemed bound to the other so they would reconnect. At their last reunion, he performs a magic show, where she is in attendance, but is now betrothed to a brutal and cruel prince. She doesn’t love the prince because she knows what’s in store for her, and she could never love another being so in love with her childhood friend. Still, there is no leaving this prince because once he has you, he believes he owns you. To leave him meant living in constant fear for your family and yourself.

‘The illusionist was no stranger to this prince, as his physical and emotional violence against women was not a well-kept secret. He also knew that people didn’t hold the prince accountable, perhaps out of fear, so his cruelty only seemed to escalate.

‘After that magic show, the two lovers start to meet in private, and the magic between them is genuine and not overly romanticized. He found that she never took off the locket he had made for her as a child, and she discovered that he had never stopped hoping for her. Not only are they now fully admitting to their love, but they cannot stop; it would have been torment for them to separate once they rejoined.

‘But the lovers are only together for so long before the woman is killed, suspiciously, after a fight with the prince; found near the body was plenty of evidence to show the prince’s guilt, but sadly, it seemed there would be no justice, as the prince had never been held accountable for anything. The illusionist was heartbroken and lost, but found a way to speak with the dead. He could not talk to her, but he incorporated this skill into the act.

‘Eventually, she communicated from the dead with him in front of many people through many showings, and with time, she disclosed her killer as the prince. A surge in faith in the afterlife inspired action among the people, prompting increased scrutiny from the usually complicit police and public condemnation of the monarchy. This creates pressure that builds, and unlike before, the people are bold and unmovable in their call for justice. There was this perfect recipe to bring a rotten, untouchable person down that could only be conjured by magic. The prince tried his fear tactics, never facing the consequences prior, but this was much bigger than himself. Unfortunately, the prince decides to take his own life, never truly paying for the terror he caused so many.

‘This all made me very sad until Larissa explained that the whole thing was an illusion and the woman was alive. The illusionist had given her a potion that allowed no pulse to be detected when examined, and they planted the evidence. They had no choice because they knew that he would never allow her to be free, and if she weren’t with him, he would’ve killed her. They also knew that he was extremely dangerous, especially to women and children, and nobody was stopping him. They were hopeful that with this act, the prince would finally face some justice for what he had done, and that a much kinder ruler would take charge, allowing the lovers to be together.

‘I could see why she liked the story; our situation had many parallels. It only took a moment for me to realize what she was suggesting; she wanted us to fake her death. Her father was highly possessive, unreasonable, and stubborn; she could not see spending her life trying to be someone else, but we would never let her go. We also realized that this was best for him; his path made him a monster, and he could never get better on his own; control is a drug no abuser ever kicks, no matter the cost to themselves or anyone else. If she were out of the picture, then perhaps he could finally go through the stages of grief, which would allow you to move on with your life and possibly even feel happiness again.

‘This plan made me love her all the more because she found a solution, and I never thought there was one. She was just as clever as she was beautiful. I still didn’t know what to say, so she pulled me in and started to kiss me. She smelled like vanilla, and I felt the electricity coursing through my body as we kissed; with Larissa, I felt everything.

‘When the time came for me to depart to evade the general, she asked me to promise to carry out her plan because it was best for us all. I agreed to do everything to make that possible.

‘After we said ‘goodbye,’ I disconnected, and my former colleague, who was as close to a friend as I had these days, snuck me out of that top-secret facility.

‘Then I asked Alejandro if he would come to dinner with me that night, as I had something important that I needed to discuss with him. You could tell he was scared, as the general was terrifying, especially if he felt you had crossed him. But he also felt an allegiance to me because I had taken a chance on him ten years prior.

‘Alejandro didn’t go to one of the colleges we seem to favor for hiring, but he did have drive. Even when we didn’t initially hire him, he checked in regularly. When that didn’t work, he asked if we accept interns, but the nature of the work is so top-secret that the fewer people involved, the better. With a revolving door of interns, that seems to be something that would become more of a hindrance than a help. When his request to be an intern was denied, he returned and wouldn’t stop; during this time, I came to like him, so I offered him a paid position at a lower company level. And I never regretted that decision because he never bait-and-switched; he continued the same drive and devotion throughout his entire career and became a protégé to me, more than anyone else, because he had endeared himself to me.

‘That night, Alejandro came over to my house for dinner. I asked him if he had ever seen the movie ‘The Illusionist.’ He excitedly said that he had, and strangely enough, it was one of his favorite movies. He gushed about it and how Jessica Biel was his favorite actress, and it all felt serendipitous to me.

‘Then, I brought up the general, and his feelings were similar: he admired his all-encompassing love for his daughter, but carefully, he spoke of the hardship of working for the abusive tyrant the general became. Alejandro tried to be understanding because the circumstances were so convoluted, but his treatment of people was deplorable.

‘Then, Alejandro diverted the subject and said everybody missed working with me because I always treated everyone respectfully and never made them feel less than. He noted that many of my coworkers, if they hadn’t been contracted, would’ve left with me because of how bad things got after I left. What they ended up with was not what they signed up for.

‘So knowing that he was willing to see things as they were, I knew I had a shot at convincing him to try to change things for the better, even at risk to himself. I explained that during my secret visit with Larissa, she had expressed so much distress that she was nearly suicidal. Everyone knew her living conditions: she lived in darkness, despite being built of so much light. I explained how miserable the general’s life was; he would never be able to move forward or be a good man if Larissa were still in the picture. The only way this could move forward is if he were forced to let go, and we could make that happen.

‘Even with my very persuasive arguments and Alejandro’s loyalty to me, he still did not want to get involved for fear of legal action or retaliation. I understood everything he was saying, but then I asked him what he would want somebody to do if he were in that situation. He considered this for a second and then put his head in his hands. You could tell he was conflicted, and I hated putting him in that position, especially when I made the plea emotional to him, but I knew this would be best for everyone, including the general.

‘After some time, he pulled his head up and said it was a lot and he would have to think about it. I was concerned because, almost always, when somebody doesn’t give you an answer on the spot, it is usually just a polite way to say ‘no’ without being awkward, so they can later say it in a more comfortable setting. ‘When he left, I lost hope because that was the one person who could do anything about this; still, if Alejandro declined, I knew he wouldn’t tell anybody and jeopardize me.

‘That night, I couldn’t sleep, and I just lay there and thought about how perfect our love was. I honestly didn’t know if I could even continue living without it. I finally fell asleep and dreamed that the general was chasing us, and we couldn’t escape him, no matter how hard we tried to evade him.

‘Then, four days after the meeting, I had given up hope when the phone rang, and Alejandro asked if he could come by later that evening, and I agreed.

‘When we met, he said he knew he had to decline the offer because it was illegal based on the contracts. My heart sank until, after a brief moment, he continued and said that he felt that way until he had a nightmare. He dreamed that he was placed in a crystal ball and was trying to get out to see his boyfriend again, but he couldn't. He tried everything to break the crystal ball or escape, but he was unable to do so. He said what made the nightmare exceptionally scary was that it continued and didn’t change like any of his other nightmares, so he was stuck in that ball all alone, unable to move for the entire night.

‘Then, he had the same nightmare three nights in a row, and he kept wishing somebody would help get him out of there. Alejandro said he woke up feeling more terrified than ever; being trapped and owned is genuinely the stuff of nightmares. He explained that the extreme feeling of helplessness and the desperate want for support and assistance that never came was truly horrifying, which led him to change his mind and decide to help, even at risk to himself, because he would want the same done if he were in the situation, and he wanted those nightmares to stop.

‘I was so overjoyed that I cried, and when I could speak, I thanked him, got up, and hugged him. At that moment, I truly understood the totality of karma; if you treat people well, they’ll be loyal and have your back when needed. My tears and embrace confirmed that he was making the correct decision.

‘The following day, I started to formulate a plan; the main obstacle was that he owned the laboratory machines, and she couldn’t live without them. I knew that I could likely re-create the machines that kept her alive, but even still, I needed her brain and body. But if I just took her, he would hunt me down to the ends of the Earth. I couldn’t figure it out, but decided I could lay some pieces down, even if I didn’t have them all.

‘So I sold everything I owned, cashed out savings and retirement, and made plans to build a laboratory in my basement that could keep her alive. I spent the next six months finishing that lab; during that time, I tried to convince Alejandro to sneak me in again, but he thought that was unwise. He figured, why risk it before we make a great escape? I couldn’t disagree. I was worried that she would think I had abandoned her again, yet this feeling inside my heart said she knew I would never leave her.

‘Once my lab was completed, I had nothing to do but think and continue to try to figure out how to make it happen; I needed her to appear dead but not be dead, and I needed her body and brain, which would be noticed if taken. It’s not as if we could say she was dead because the machine she was linked up to would show differently, and he could access her mind; she would never be able to hide.

‘The inability to figure this all out was driving me crazy until one day, my car’s GPS rerouted me due to construction, and it was my eureka moment. If I couldn’t physically take her with me, then maybe I could reroute her consciousness to my lab. Then Alejandro and I could hook her up to another program that would make it appear as though she were brain-dead again. Alejandro would then promise the general that he could bring her back to life again while keeping her away.

‘I focused on two main areas: moving the lab overseas to distance ourselves and creating the program. It took some time, but I was able to develop a program that would reroute her without betraying her, as it would make her appear to have no brain function. The general was a brilliant man, but he lacked the education and knowledge necessary to figure out this project. Only one team member had enough training and information to figure out the ruse: Alejandro, who was in on it.

‘After the move to Belgium was complete and everything was how I wanted it, I started working on getting her rerouted while Alejandro worked on testing the program.

‘Once we had confidence in the program, we tested and rerouted her to ensure everything worked correctly, and it all went more perfectly than anything I have ever worked on, which was confirmation. We continued to test this and the contingencies for a few months; I would see her for an hour early in the morning, which was heavenly.

‘When we were highly confident with everything, we set a date for the permanent reroute, and on that day at 2 AM US time, Alejandro called the general to say the emergency alert went off and he would run to the lab to check on everything. He made a follow-up call an hour later to report that something was seriously wrong, and the general rushed down to the lab. Alejandro played his part with Oscar-level precision, and the general was absolutely devastated. The general blamed me, but Alejandro reminded him that I had no option for a lengthy trial due to time constraints; at this, the general screamed and broke many things. Alejandro tried to calm him and promised he would do everything to bring her back; however, once he made this promise, he realized the gravity of this situation; he often thought of the dangers of being involved but hadn’t ever considered that he would never be able to leave the company; the only consolation was the fact that the general would not live forever.

‘Unfortunately, it was a repeat of before with much more rage; this time, the general was not a broken man requesting help but an unhinged man making threats. Still, Alejandro figured many people work high-stress jobs and find ways to cope; plus, the general was not a young man.

‘After the successful rerouting, everything went along beautifully for a while. We had each other and a lot of creative control over our lives as we were part of a computer program.

But a few months into our bliss, Alejandro called me and said that the general was so dissatisfied with his progress that he wanted to bring in new people. This scared Alejandro because if they brought in another team, it would only be a matter of time before somebody realized something wasn’t quite right or did something that would inadvertently disconnect or kill her; so many things could go wrong, and they likely would. I told him I would think of a solution and to stay calm. I truly hated watching Alejandro fall apart because of something he was doing for me.

‘To make matters worse, with Alejandro distracted, there were complications with the rerouting, so it was like a bad phone connection. I would see or hear her, but then it would be fuzzy, or she would disappear. I knew the only way to remedy the situation was to put us in the same program, which would require me to be alive in the traditional sense. However, I could never think of anyone who could take this over; it was a complicated situation.

‘Then, one night, when I hadn’t been able to connect in a few days, I was particularly terrified. I had a drink, which I had been doing more of lately, and received a phone call from Valori, who had seen the news about your wife but did not have your contact information. I immediately internationally called the hospital where Nessie was being treated, and, by chance, the attending physician was somebody with whom I had done my residency years prior. He didn’t hesitate to consult with me.

‘During this conversation, he advised that he would be asking you to let Nessie go, but I asked him to keep her alive; I would fly to the United States and talk to you about a trial that she could be involved in that would save her life in the simplest of terms. I then took a private jet to the hospital to speak with you.

‘Zachy, I wanted to offer my help because you were kind to me when nobody else was. However, during that flight, I realized this could also be the answer to our prayers, because I needed someone to oversee this operation, and I couldn’t think of anyone better than you. We both loved women, and this was the only way to be with them, so I knew you would have an exceptional understanding of the importance and an invested interest. I knew I would never have to worry. I trust you with my life. Once I trained you, I realized that my perception of you was highly accurate.

‘Now, my friend, I must leave this world for a better place, but I will see you whenever you’d like when you plug in. I love you, my friend.’

**Chapter Seven: The Pointe of No Return**

I looked at Zachy with astonishment as I could hardly believe it; he just smiled and continued, “Mary, I then performed the procedure that would allow Doctor Raymond Myers to never wake again in the traditional sense and be attached to his genius invention. I was pretty nervous because if this went wrong, he could die, and I wasn’t sure that I would be able to do anything about that. But everything went according to plan, and I relaxed, realizing that the plan had been created by one of the most meticulous and ingenious men of modern times; his contingencies had contingencies.

“Then, a week later, I visited him when the transition was completed; we went to dinner for a double date. It all seemed too good to be true, and maybe that should’ve been a warning to me, but then I figured plenty of tragedy pre-cursed any of this extreme joy, so I should take the win. However, my initial concern that things were going too well proved correct when, one day, I received a letter in the mail that would change everything. The letter was concerning because it didn't go to the P.O. Box we had set up under an alias. We didn’t receive mail at the actual house/lab under a different alias because we didn’t want anybody to know it existed. But then I noticed that the letter was from Myers’ protégé Alejandro, which relieved me. Opening it was strange, but I knew Raymond had updated him on everything.

“The letter, unfortunately, was a suicide note. Alejandro explained that he had tried his hardest to maintain his position, but the general was a force with which to be reckoned. Having new people there was stressful enough, but then Alejandro was forced to step down, which meant he no longer had any purview over the project. Alejandro felt incredibly guilty about not fulfilling his duty to Doctor Myers. Additionally, the prolonged berating and cruelty of the general wore on him. The stress and secrecy inevitably caused a rift between his husband and himself, which resulted in him moving out and filing for divorce. It was all too much for him. He wanted to inform me that he would be gone when I read the letter and that I should plan accordingly.

“Naturally, I sat there stunned because he seemed like such a good guy. I felt terrible that his life had ended, trying to be loyal to somebody else. Then, my sadness turned to worry when I realized that a considerable component of this operation was no longer part of it. Alejandro’s complete departure put us at immense risk because even though Myers was worlds ahead of even the leaders in the field, they would eventually catch up and figure it all out. This would affect not only Larissa and Myers but also Nessie. If something happened with the project, they would all go down, not just the two of them.

“After reading the letter, my days became filled with extreme anxiety and paranoia. I wanted to inform Myers what had transpired for his guidance, but then I saw how happy they were and didn’t want to worry them. I also figured that with Alejandro gone and nobody trained on the project, it would take a long time to be discovered. So, I shouldered the burden of knowing the truth and all the worry that comes with it. Even so, I love my wife so much that it could drive out much of the dark that loomed over us. “After Alejandro died, the general, now working almost exclusively in the intelligence field, found his death suspicious instead of tragic and worried about sensitive material. So, he had his domicile broken into and was able to collect enough information to determine that Myers and Alejandro had been in constant communication. This may have seemed inconsequential, considering Alejandro was Myers's protégé, but the general is not a man you should underestimate.

“Once the general found that Doctor Myers was in Europe, he wondered why he would leave his family behind. Still, I don’t think the general ever suspected what was happening, but it was enough to warrant some digging in. It took the general a fair amount of time to find anything because Myers had become the ghost he was, in a sense.

“After Alejandro’s death, I started to drink excessively. I like to drink outside of the house because it makes me feel less like an alcoholic somehow. On one of my solo outings, life would twist again dramatically. For many reasons, I never spoke to anyone during my visits to this upscale hotel bar. But then, on a particularly taxing day, I met someone who seemed quite similar. He was about my age, carrying a stack of books related to my field and a newsletter from my alma mater. I thought, ‘What are the chances that I would meet somebody from my alma mater in Europe?’ So, while I usually maintain complete privacy, I was homesick, so I decided to engage. The conversation was so uplifting, fluid, and natural that I thought perhaps God does send you somebody when you need them the most. Reminiscing about better times did wonders for my mood, but after a few drinks, I felt more drunk than I had ever been in my life. I thought this was odd because I had drunk less than usual, as I was busy talking. I then felt as though I was on a boat, where everything was moving slowly back and forth, and I felt sick to my stomach.

“The next thing I remember was waking up in the hospital. I had been given the date rape drug, but I had not been robbed or sexually assaulted, so I wondered if I had accidentally grabbed or been served a drink that was meant for someone else. It took me some time to feel like I could even make it home, as I still felt dizzy and disoriented; however, I eventually made that journey.

“When I got home, it had been ransacked, so I realized that the motivation was robbery, just not what was on my person. The place was an absolute disaster; someone tore it apart in a way I didn’t even think was possible; there were things taken apart and dismantled that I couldn’t even fathom. I walked around to see what had been taken and noticed all my valuables were still there, making my stomach drop to the floor. I worried I had been complacent and left out discernible information about Myer’s home/lab. I thought that maybe when there was nothing of high dollar value in my tiny place, burglars would believe they would find it at the lab, or possibly they thought it was the type of lab that would have drugs. Realizing this, I rushed to the lab as quickly as possible and told myself not to lose my composure, as there were incredible security measures in place.

“When I got to the lab, I was mortified; the lab had also been ransacked. I was so worried that something could’ve happened that would have caused an issue with the program, but I had only a moment to think about this before a bag was pulled over my head, and I was slammed to the ground, zip-tied, then pulled out of the lab and into a car. I was terrified and felt sure they were going to kill me, but I figured if Nessie was gone, then I might as well be, too.

“After a lengthy drive, I was pulled out of the car, taken down several stairs, and placed in the chair. When the cloth bag was pulled off my head, I realized that one of the men who abducted me was the man from the night before. How could I have been so stupid? He was obviously a plant; I should have known.

“Once I was bound to the chair, a stocky man with an entirely shaved head and crystal blue eyes walked in from another room; this was my first meeting with the general. He interrogated me extensively about the whole operation and threatened my wife’s life if I didn’t give him complete and entirely truthful answers. I was devoted to Doctor Myers, but he would never come before my wife’s life. I knew Myers would’ve done the same thing if Larissa had been threatened. So, I answered his questions.

“First, I explained the fact that Larissa’s consciousness was alive; Myers figured out a way to have her body remain in the general’s lab but routed her consciousness to his lab. Alejandro was our contact on the inside, ensuring it appeared as though she had no brain activity while maintaining everything. I did say, in all fairness, that this was all because both Larissa and Myers felt that the general was destroying himself and Larissa by not accepting the situation as it was. It was Larissa’s idea; she felt unworthy, but she loved Myers.

“My calm and fair explanation did nothing but infuriate him. The general started to scream, ‘In love? You can’t be fucking serious right now. Do you think that’s love? You don’t see how sick and twisted that is? He was her physician and almost a surrogate father to her.’

“I knew that my response needed to be wise as my wife’s life was on the line, but he did direct me to give honest answers. So I said, ‘General, before your daughter essentially died, did you ever think a computer program would allow her to live again, or does it sound like something out of a far-fetched science fiction movie? The circumstances surrounding this matter are abnormal.

‘When Myers first told me about his love for Larissa, I must say that as a doctor and someone who takes pride in my ethics, I had a hard time with this. Still, it’s not as if we were in the clearest ethical waters anyhow, and when everything’s murky, having those clear boundaries and rules is harder. This experience allowed me to accept life and situations as they are, rather than how I would like them to be. And once I spent time with them, my perspective began to shift. I still saw the wrong in it, but began to see its beauty. Myers created a miracle and then fostered her creation while his hobbies and family lay by the wayside; it was selfless and took sacrifice. There was never a power imbalance between them; they were teammates and supported and encouraged each other greatly. I could see that all of these situations between them would unavoidably create a deep bond. Then, I approved of it; I thought it was good, not perfect, but good at its heart.’

“Mary, I thought my explanation was entirely honest and fair. I never said I thought it was right, but instead, I told how it was, and I felt the sum was beautiful. I thought this would help the general feel better about the situation and hopefully lower his anger, but it didn’t have a positive effect on him. The general’s actions and temperament proved that Myer’s assessment was accurate as I watched him stomp around the room, hit things, and scream degrading comments about Alejandro and Doctor Myers. All the while, I became increasingly worried about my own life, as this man was unhinged and volatile, but with power and money —a hazardous combination.

“When the general was finally finished with his ranting and breaking things, he pulled up a chair in front of me and said, ‘Once I found out who you were and your connection to Doctor Myers, I thoroughly investigated you, and I could not find anything that was unsavory; people only said terrific things about you. I am sure that you are a reasonable man who would take the only deal offered to you when it is. You hold Doctor Myers in high regard; you may even consider him a friend, but Myers is dead. What he did is unconscionable to me; if I let him live, I would forever be worried that he would try to take her from me, and she is mine. Zachy, in my business, we don’t solve problems; we eliminate them. Solutions may prove temporary, but when you eliminate the problem, you never have to worry about it. Myers’s body was cut up into pieces, and nobody will ever find those pieces.

‘Now, I’m having my daughter routed back to where she belongs, where she’ll stay; however, your wife is still in the lab. Should you agree to the terms of the deal, she will be moved safely, and we will continue to care for her and bear the expense for as long as you maintain your end of the bargain. Zachy, what’s missing from civilians is obedience; people aren’t entirely obedient anymore, so you must set measures to ensure they are. This is not a think it over or sleep on it type of deal; you’ll take it now, or the offer will disappear.’

“Mary, I’ve never in my life tried so hard not to cry because I did care about Myers; he saved my wife’s life. I also felt extreme terror at a man who could kill without any conscience or fear of consequence. This was clearly a man who was above the law; he could do anything and would. What could I do? A man who just admitted he killed Myers held my wife’s life; I loved my wife so much that I would do anything to save her, so I agreed.

“Once I agreed, the general put his hand on my shoulders and said, ‘See, I knew you would be a reasonable man and make the right decision. I will be in touch about the move and everything else that will transpire from here.’

“Then they put the bag back over my head and drove me home, where I sat alone and cried because I felt sorry for what happened to Myers, and I knew Larissa would be devastated. I also didn’t have a way to contact anyone to gather information about my wife or my future, so this was one of the most challenging times of my life. I drank all the time and just waited for word.

“When one month passed, I wondered if this wasn’t some sick game; at the very least, it was posturing and heartless.

“Then, one day, my phone rang, and I was given instructions on the flights I would take, who would pick me up, and how we would go from there. The next day, I flew to the United States and was about to start the worst chapter of my life.

“When I arrived, they put me up in housing and provided me with a car; I’m confident both are bugged and tracked, so I knew that my life with civilian freedoms was now dead. My everything would be monitored by a man who sees no limits to control and can never get enough. My initial assessments of him were correct because, after that, I did more things against who I am as a person than I ever thought possible; if I wasn’t participating in something unethical, I was looking the other way while this stuff was going on. But I had no recourse, as he had something over me that wouldn’t allow me to decline, quit, or whistle blow.

“Adjusting to my new life was incredibly challenging because it greatly differed from my previous life, but I didn’t know what to do. I ran into the same issue as Myers; the general was hardened by pain and was displacing it, and he would continue to tear me apart while using my wife’s life, as she was a tool. I knew there was good underneath, but now enough had happened that he became a monster. So I thought, ‘How do I change this?’ I would never be able to recreate a lab and reroute her, and no one could protect me from the top general and intelligence leader; there was no solution.

“To make matters worse, my wife’s transfer worked, but his daughter’s didn’t; her brain was functioning, but the equipment didn’t work, or she was hiding well, which resulted in animosity towards me and added pressure. I was doing everything to get his daughter back, but the mind is vast and infinite. I did everything possible, but the more time passed, the angrier, more unpredictable, and less reliable he became.

“Our team of four, on indefinite contracts, tried their best to support each other through being frequent victims of the general’s wrath. We always tried to celebrate and encourage one another. One thing we did to boost morale was to host small potlucks on our birthdays. We had one for my wife’s birthday because my team loved her, and the general was supposed to be in Nevada for a meeting. Unfortunately, unbeknownst to us, the meeting was postponed, and the general showed up, becoming infuriated. He took it as if we were rubbing his nose in the fact that my wife had a birthday when his daughter was away.

“In a fit of rage, he became terrifying, and the three other members of my team cleared out quickly; it was apparent they had done this more than a few times, but I couldn’t leave my wife.

“Once the three others were gone, he came up and shoved me hard; I was stunned and didn’t react, so he kept pushing me.

“When this didn’t get a reaction, he started unplugging my wife’s equipment. I know he felt that if Larissa was gone, why does Nessie get to stay? I knew he was in pain, but I couldn’t let him hurt Nessie, so I came up from behind and tried to restrain him, but slipped on the cords he had unplugged.

“Consequently, I knocked into him with force; he went to the right, and I fell to the left. I hit hard but got up quickly and noticed the general wasn’t even trying to get up. I called out to him and tapped him, but he didn't respond. I then saw a head gash and realized he had hit his head on some equipment. I felt for a pulse and was relieved that there was one, but I didn’t know what to do; I was in shock.

“I plugged my wife back in and figured I would call for help. That’s when the team, who didn’t hear screaming and thought it was all clear, entered. Their faces showed the shock and horror that I felt. We then could only think of saving his life. Seeing the dire situation, our group leader initiated the procedure to connect him to LIVAD, and we assisted him. Strangely enough, the people he terrorized were working hard to save his life.

“Against all odds, the operation and input were successful. He was now alive in another place. Since we quickly hooked him up to the program, he kept much more of himself than the two before him.

“Unfortunately, as he went through a similar learning process as the other two, he clearly held onto anger and cruelty. We stayed away from him mostly and hoped things would improve with time.

“Luckily, the whole team changed, with the general no longer running the project. We no longer felt like we were holding our breath while enduring one evil act after the next. I stopped drinking entirely. It was such a happy time. During this time, the team worked to ‘factory reset’ the general’s mind.

“But our bliss didn’t last long because the general became exceptionally angry and capable of controlling that program; it was hard to witness the type of world that man created with the same resources Larissa used to create a lovely world, and Nessie used to create a safe world.

“Then, one day, Nessie asked me if your body was being kept alive, could you die while connected to the program? I never thought about this because the person attached to LIVAD has their life programmed by our team or creates it themselves with parameters, and we wouldn’t kill them. I thought about suicide, but then why would someone do that who is essentially in heaven? That’s when I realized the answer: someone would want to kill themselves if they couldn’t be with the person they love and was the target of frequent emotional abuse; I immediately thought of Larissa. It would explain what happened to her. But even if someone did kill themselves in the program, I assumed that it was like a bad dream where you came back.

“I immediately brought this up with the team, and they had no answers. We never considered the possibility, and we couldn’t test it because it might kill the people we would test it on. That is when my teammate Reagan asked if we could test this through the downloaded consciousness they had. I had no idea what she was talking about, so she explained that Alejandro and Raymond had created their consciousness as a computer download, trying to figure out if the human body could die and still live on in the program without a body and mind. She said the technology was not advanced enough to test this, but the downloads were kept safe. She wondered if they could gather enough data by causing this to happen without using a person connected to the body. I was surprised that Raymond had not mentioned this, especially when I asked him questions about where this information should have come up.

“Either way, this was our only option, and we had nothing to lose, so we started working on this. The technology we were currently using was unbelievable; I never thought my mind could be more blown until I saw Myers’ work on this project. Essentially, he wanted to make it so that the mortal body would not be necessary for the program, which would increase safety and make this more affordable.

“Once I had full access to the information, I could locate Alejandro’s profile but not Raymond Myers’s, so we figured the general had undoubtedly deleted it.

“After much time learning this complicated system, I selected Alejandro’s profile to test this. This brought him back to life in a way, and he was a great man to get to know.

“Once we had completed his recreation, we supplied him with the mission, and then he carried it out while we monitored him on the computer. What we learned proved invaluable: when someone dies within the program, their consciousness has nowhere to go, so it goes into an AI computer program that is not individualized. This means their consciousness enters a story mode, which continues until the story ends, and then it proceeds to the next one. Myers created this as a precaution in case something went wrong within the program, so the displaced consciousness would have a place to go until they could figure it out. We had no idea if you could return to yourself once the story mode entered. So, Alejandro was a different character from one story to the next, with his personality traits, but not his own story.

“Now that we believed we knew what was happening, we had to figure out how to find her within the stories. So, I accessed the backup program and noticed these file folders with the stories’ names on each. They were all so well-organized and innumerable. I started to scroll through them, and that is when a file folder caught my eye; it was labeled ‘The Ilusionstt,’ which I thought was strange because the very OCD Myers would spell check and triple check anything. I never found any errors in anything he did, which is not an exaggeration.

“Curious, I clicked on the folder, which had many documents. The first was a letter explaining that Myers had hidden his download from the general, as he did not trust him. It then explained how to download and fully realize his consciousness. I started to download him, but all the extra security he had added made it time-consuming; it was much more tedious than Alejandro's.

“While working on this, I tried to find Larissa, but it was the genius general who had found her and led me to her; he was in pursuit of her, trying to harm or kill her. I watched the stories unfold, but was unable to do much more. The strangest thing was that when Alejandro ran through the stories, he could never change them, but the general made considerable changes to these stories. Once the general had the power, he found her and tormented her, which was horrible enough, but then he started to kill her. The story would then end and put her in another until he found her and terrified her all over again. I tried everything I could think of, but couldn’t save her.

“But then, one day, the stories started to change slightly, which is when I realized that Raymond Myers had become fully downloaded and had begun to join her in the stories. I didn’t know if AI Raymond was similar to the real Raymond, but watching him run around trying to be there for her, I knew he loved her, so they shared a lot. I had no clue whether that was from instinct or memory because I never spoke with him as he immediately entered story mode. However, even with Raymond entering the story, the two were still tormented and killed by the general, who continually worked to keep them apart.

“While working hard on a solution, I still made time for Nessie. During one of our visits, she asked me to let her go. She said her faith told her she needed to move on to what's next and not be stuck here. She wanted me to be with our neglected children and friends. I kept begging her to reconsider, because I couldn't let her go. I could never tell her how many evil things I did while working under the general to keep her alive, but I did them nonetheless, so to lose her after that would be devastating. But what could I do? If I prevented her from leaving, then she would be a prisoner and resent me; if I let her go, I would lose everything. So, all I could do was try my best to make it appealing for her to stay and for her to realize that I couldn't live without her. But the more I tried to hold on, the more she pushed me away. I knew if I loved her, I would care about her wishes even if they weren’t the best for me. Yet, I still couldn’t do it. I needed her. “Then, one day, I saw that she was noticeably changing for the worse, and I realized I was on the same path as the general and would end up on the dark side if I didn’t change my actions. So I agreed to let her go.”

Right then, Kalvis walked in, and I was stunned to see him there. He then said, “He has a gun and is coming for us.”

I was so distracted by Zachy that I had almost forgotten what was happening during Zach’s story, and I could not believe it.

In a panicked voice, I asked, “Who is after us? What the fuck is going on?”

I looked at Zachy, and he said, “It’s the general, Larissa. Do you want me to unplug you so your soul and consciousness are not connected here anymore?”

I realized he called me Larissa, so I looked at him in disbelief. Zachy said, “You are Larissa, Mary; this is your 45th story, and you always die, and I cannot stop him. I can only alter so much, and he can alter even more. Alejandro has been protecting you; you know him as Josh, but he can never stop it. Do you want to see what’s next? Do you want to go into the unknown boldly?”

I looked at Kalvis, who was once known as Doctor Raymond Myers; he grabbed me, kissed me, and said he would go wherever and do whatever I wanted. I knew that he felt this way, knowing it would be endless, painful endings without a solution to stop that. These words and his look sparked something in me; I felt an incredible feeling of being intensely in love. I loved him, and I can’t explain it.

Then it all came back to me, and I knew I loved him and could never risk losing him again; he was who I felt bound to, so I said, “I’m staying.”

Zachy asked, “Are you sure? He will kill you. You will start over and experience him again, maybe forever. Are you willing to sacrifice repeatedly here when you might go to heaven instead?”

I said, “I’m not leaving Kal.”

Then, Kalvis, née Raymond Myers, grabbed and kissed me passionately; he knew I loved him in the way he loved me.

Zachy seemed scared and saddened, but knew you couldn’t pressure people into significant decisions or be God, so he hugged us both.

Then, he walked out the door to send his wife off, but at least I knew he would also gain his life back, not tethered to her. As soon as he left our computerized dimension, the door flung open, and Kennan, née my father, the general, looked right at us: he didn’t remember me, and I didn’t remember him. He was my father, but he was only the bad parts, and I was no longer the daughter he’d always searched for, but his victim and target. It was dark, but Kalvis, my light, grabbed my hand and said, “I love you and will see you soon. I will always find you.”

Then the bullets came spraying out, and it was done.

11/11

*Dear Diary,*

*I met a very special person. His name is Gerard. He looks at me like he knows all of me. I was in love in a day. It’s the only beautiful thing in my life. Even my overprotective friend Josh loves him; it’s impossible not to.*

*Faye*

The end

11/11